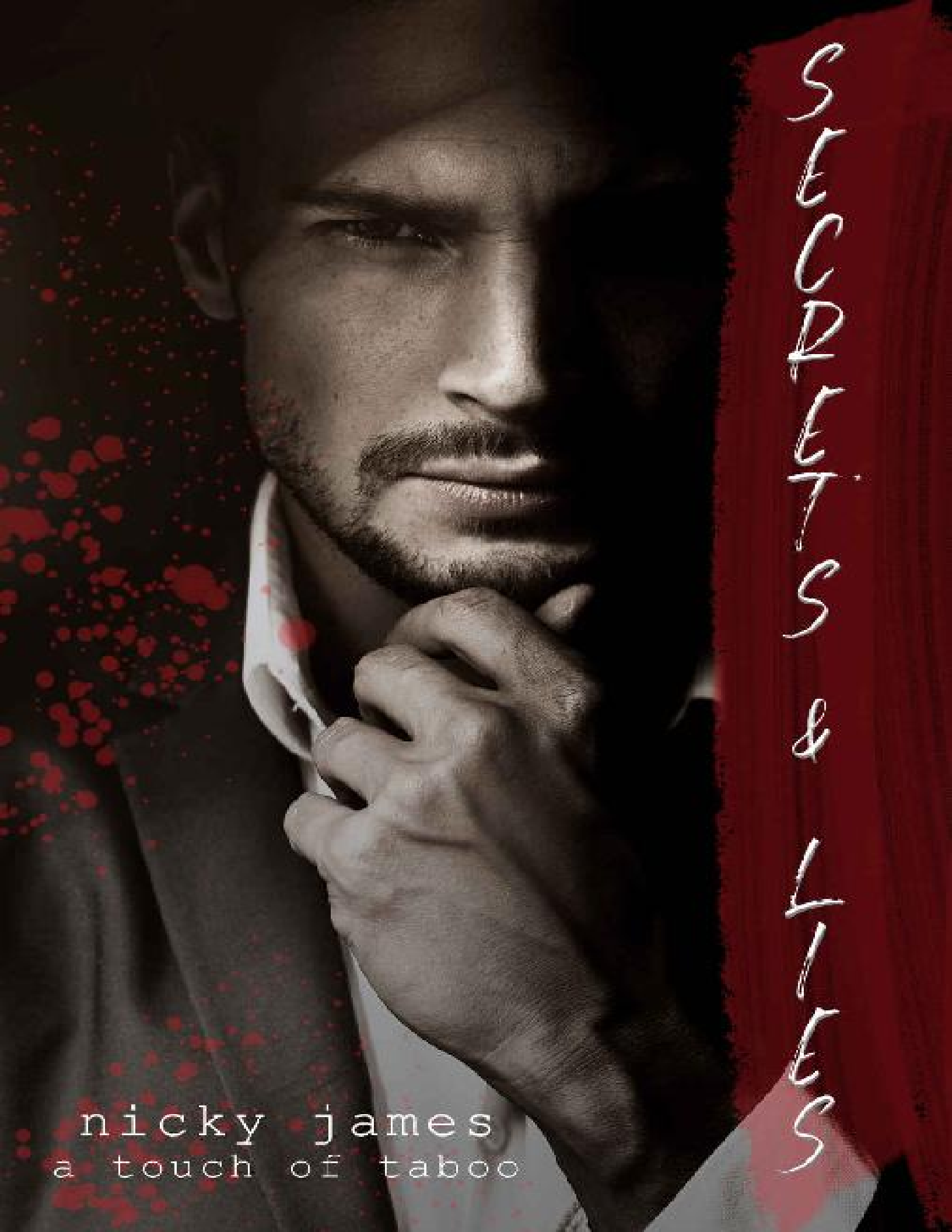

SECRETS & LIES
nicky james
a touch of taboo

Secrets & Lies

By Nicky James

OceanofPDF.com

Secrets & Lies

Copyright © 2019 by Nicky James

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover Artist:

Nicky James

Editing:

LesCourt Author Service

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

OceanofPDF.com

Table of Contents

WARNING
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Epilogue
Other Titles by Nicky James

OceanofPDF.com

WARNING

This book contains content of a taboo nature which some people may find objectionable. The two main characters are consenting adults, but their actions may be regarded as disturbing or unnatural to some readers.
Proceed with *extreme* caution.

You've been warned.
If you are having doubts, now is the time to turn back because once I suck you in, you may be scarred for life.
Or I may convert you to the dark side.
(Which means a lifetime of seeking out more taboo reads and always looking over your shoulder just in case someone is looking.)

Again, you've been warned.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter One
Rhyker

OceanofPDF.com

February 2000

“I’M PREGNANT.”

I stared, dumbfounded and unable to process the meaning of those two words. Not *what* they meant—I wasn’t stupid—but what they meant to *me*, a fifteen-year-old kid who’d experimented with sex and alcohol for the first time on New Year’s Eve.

Sex with a woman.

It had been a test. The woman, not the alcohol. A test that had proven without a doubt that I was not as straight as I thought. Confirmation of something I’d already suspected, to be honest.

In fact, I was not straight at all and cringed at the memory of that night. Not for the first time, I thanked God for my active imagination and ability to conjure up sexy images of hot male celebrities on a whim or that night would have been embarrassing.

“Are you listening to me, Rhyker?”

I blinked away the vulgar image of Madison riding me in the spare bedroom at her best friend’s house and focused on the worry lines creasing her ivory skin. Her rosy lips pouted a fraction, and she batted her long lashes over her baby-blue eyes like I was supposed to know what to do.

Pregnant?

“Oh.”

“Oh? That’s all you have to say? Oh? I’m freaking pregnant.”

I wanted to ask if it was mine, but I figured she probably wouldn’t be telling me if that wasn’t the case.

“My mother is going to kill me. My dad is going to kill *you*. What are we going to do?”

Why was she asking me? My biggest concern was trying to get a passing grade in my remedial math class, not babies. I shifted my gaze around the bustling hallway, thinking, absorbing. At this rate, I was going to be late for said math class and get detention again—not that I cared.

“You could—I don’t know—get rid of it?”

“Oh my God! It’s not a pair of jeans that don’t fit. It’s a baby, Rhyker. A baby. Are you serious?”

I stared at her stomach as though I could somehow see the evidence of this *baby*, but, of course, I couldn’t. It was abstract, and the news hadn’t

quite penetrated my fifteen-year-old brain, so I shrugged. “Like an abortion, you know? Can’t you do that?”

Her eyes bugged, and she shoved me in the shoulder hard enough I stumbled. “What is wrong with you? I’m not doing that. God, I can’t believe I slept with you.”

That made two of us.

“Um… Okay. So, yeah, I don’t know. I’m gonna be late for class.” I thumbed over my shoulder.

Madison did the shrieky-frustration-noise girl thing that I assumed meant she was annoyed and flipped around, her wavy blonde hair bouncing on her shoulders as she marched away.

I was glad that was over.

Except, it wasn’t.

She was pregnant?

A baby?

Somewhere in my fifteen-year-old brain, I knew this was one of my more colossal fuckups. This wasn’t like failing a test or getting caught smoking weed behind the dumpster out back of the school. This was bigger. Bigger than I could envision or understand when I was already late for class.

Therefore, I shoved it aside and forgot about it.

Until a few weeks later, when I went home from school and found Madison and her parents in the front room with my parents. For a second, I couldn’t figure out why they were there. Madison and I hadn’t spoken to one another since that day in the hallway at school, so I’d completely forgotten about the life-changing bombshell she’d dropped on me.

Well, not forgotten, but it had become less real as the weeks ticked by. Not that it had ever felt *real* to begin with.

“Sit down, son.”

Why did I get the feeling this conversation was going to make me late to meet with my buddy, Darren, later? We were supposed to get stoned and check out the new skate park on the west end of town. I didn’t have time for this shit.

Hiking my sagging jeans up so they sat higher on my boxer-covered ass, I dropped down on the only vacant spot available—beside Madison on the love seat—and shifted my gaze among the adults. Four stern expressions. Four pairs of harsh eyes. Four frowns.

Yup, I was never getting out of here.

It took all my effort to remain present and not let my mind wander. Half in a daze, I picked at a hole in my jeans and fiddled with the chain attached to the wallet in my back pocket, counting minutes until I could escape.

“Madison is pregnant,” Mom informed me, with an edge to her voice she only used when she was borderline ready to lose her shit.

“Yeah. She said.”

“And you didn’t think to tell us?” Dad’s tone wasn’t any more pleasant.

I shrugged, because what the hell did they want from me? It was a mistake, and it wasn’t like she was willing to fix it.

“What I’d like to know, is when was it okay to have sex without protection?” Madison’s father’s dark eyes pinned me and waited for an answer.

What I wanted to say was, I was too drunk to think or care about protection. It wasn’t like Madison had insisted. In fact, if memory served, she’d been the one to rid me of my clothes, suck me until I got hard enough, then climbed on my lap. She’d been the one doing all the work while I’d tried to stop the alcohol-spins so I wouldn’t barf on her all while calling up images of Brad Pitt just so I could stay hard and get off. It wasn’t exactly a pleasant event or one I’d been reliving for the sheer pleasure.

When neither of us answered, our parents ended up in a yelling match, debating whose child was most negligent. Somehow, my appearance made me a delinquent teenager, and my parents clearly had no control over me. They questioned if I was stoned right then because all I could manage to do was stare and blink as I absorbed the whole situation.

I wished.

Did any of this make a difference? It wasn’t like arguing our stupidity was going to make Madison un-pregnant.

While the volume in the room rose, I stole a look at Madison again—more accurately, I stole a look at her belly. Nope, still flat. Was she sure? Could she be wrong? Was this some kind of sick joke? New Year’s Eve was over two months ago.

Of course, I didn’t know shit about babies or pregnancy, but two months seemed a significant amount of time, wasn’t it? Wouldn’t she be fat if she was pregnant?

Somewhere along the way, I zoned out again and didn't refocus on the conversation until the angry yelling was directed at me.

"You'll take responsibility for your actions. You will have an active role in this child's life. You will do your part…"

None of it meant anything. Parenthood was intangible. There was no baby yet, no belly, nothing but words and raised tempers. So I nodded, unsure what I was agreeing to, but I knew it was the easiest way out of this discussion. The fastest way to ensure I could go get stoned and forget.

What I should have been doing was asking, why not adoption? Because we were fifteen, for fuck's sake. Did these people not realize we were too young to have a baby?

But no one listened. No one cared.

Madison was pregnant. In September, we would be parents.

Oh, and I was gay—but this wasn't the time to make that announcement. Perhaps one thing at a time. My life didn't need more drama.

TWO AND A HALF months later, Madison started showing. I remembered it clearly. It was mid-May when I ran into her in the hallway after class. My eyes caught on the distinctive bump under her shirt. It felt like her stomach was flat one day then not the next.

"Rhyker!" She waved a hand, drawing my focus from her stomach to her face as she ran over.

I shuffled and threaded fingers through my dark mop of brown hair as I scanned the hallway for an escape. There was nowhere to go. Tugging my jeans up, I tipped my chin in greeting.

"What's up?"

We still didn't talk much, but I'd been dragged to her doctor's appointments regularly because that was *the responsible thing to do,* according to my parents.

"I have an ultrasound next week. We can find out what the baby is if we want. What do you think?"

I shrugged because I didn't give a shit. This little being growing inside her who apparently shared my genetics meant nothing to me. I'd seen her talking excitedly with her friends, and on the rare occasions when we conversed, she tried to *talk baby* with me, but I had a tendency to zone out.

Madison's whole opinion on this baby had shifted in recent months from fear and uncertainty to elation I didn't understand or share. She was thrilled. I was indifferent.

"I want to know if it's a girl or a boy. I hope it's a girl. Kerry and I were looking at baby clothes the other day. So much cuteness. The boy clothes are all ugly. There were these dresses and tights with little shoes that matched. Can you imagine coordinating all her little outfits and making her beautiful? I could do her hair with matching ribbons and maybe get her ears pierced."

I blinked and tugged my jeans higher, wondering how long was an appropriate amount of time to listen to Madison gush over baby clothes before I could slip away.

Midway through the conversation, she started rubbing her tiny baby bump, and the action caught my eye. The abstract was slowly growing into something a little more concrete—although it still didn't feel any more real. Could she feel it moving inside her? She hadn't said so. I assumed not yet. Out of sheer curiosity, I wanted to touch her stomach but clenched my fists and refrained.

Something was growing inside her. It was all a little too weird. A little too *X-Files* for my liking. I pictured alien babies with big heads and tentacles. Green skin with suction-cup fingers and holes in their faces for noses.

I shuddered. Thank God, Madison didn't notice.

"We have to pick names. I like Allison and Lexi the most. Maybe Jillian or Kiera. What do you think?"

I wrapped the chain on my pants around my fingers and flicked my gaze over her shoulder. Students were racing out the doors. Classes were done for the day, and I was stuck chatting baby names.

I shrugged. "Sure. Cool." I didn't care. "But what if it's a boy?"

Madison rolled her eyes. "It feels like a girl. I know I'm right."

Was that a thing? To feel what kind of baby you were growing? I didn't know.

"Oh. Okay. Whatever."

"We'll know Tuesday for sure."

Right. The ultrasound.

"Okay," I said again.

Darren zipped around the corner with his skateboard under his arm and waved, slapping his board, telling me it was time to split.

“I gotta go.” I gestured to my friend and didn’t wait for Madison to acknowledge before shifting around her and running away.

If only I could run away from this mistake. The more time that passed, the more sucked in I became. The more stuck I felt.

THAT TUESDAY, MADISON’S mom picked us up from school in the early afternoon and drove us to the physician’s office downtown. I sat in the back seat, staring out the window at the passing scenery, grateful to be out of class and for no other reason.

The weather was warm and sunny. Perfect skateboarding weather. Summer was always my favorite season. No school and plenty of board time. I couldn’t wait for the school year to end. I wondered how long we’d be stuck at this stupid appointment.

The conversation up front was focused on the baby. Everything was *always* focused on this baby, and I couldn’t seem to get on board or find the same enthusiasm. The only thing I’d felt since finding out was restricted. Trapped. Like a chain had been wrapped around my neck and tied me indefinitely to this girl I couldn’t give two shits about. A girl I didn’t even like.

All because I’d wanted to experiment and see if I could fuck a chick and feel anything that wasn’t disgust. I scrubbed at my eyes, trying to rid my mind of the images of that horrendous night.

My father had been telling me to use my brain since I was a kid. Every stupid mistake I made, I’d hear, *“Rhyker, use your brain for once.”* This was the first time I truly understood and saw the ramifications of my poor choices.

We arrived at the doctor’s office and gathered in the too-small waiting room. Every other seat was filled with pregnant women. There were kids playing at the lame-ass toy center set up in the corner, screaming and shouting and squealing, running back and forth between the toys and their mothers. My head hurt listening to it, so I tried to tune them out.

Two other men were present, and we locked eyes for a brief moment, exchanging looks of sympathy because I assumed they too had been dragged against their will to participate in something meaningless. We weren’t the ones growing the seed; why did we have to be there?

All the reading material available in the waiting room was baby-related. I'd learned that the first time we'd gone to an appointment. Snatching a random magazine off the small table, I thumbed through a few pages as we waited, the content uninteresting, but I succeeded in making myself look busy so no one talked to me.

They really needed different selections. You couldn't tell me other men read this shit willingly.

Madison sat beside me, rubbing a hand over the small bump under her shirt. I stole glances from time to time, wondering about the tiny human growing inside. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't picture a baby in my life or a snot-nosed toddler calling me Dad. That future was too fuzzy to see. Too complex and undefined.

A nurse pushed through a door as she scanned her chart. "Madison Kelly?"

"That's us." Madison snagged my arm, dislodging the magazine from my grasp and yanking me to my feet.

Madison's mom was already following the nurse through the doorway, and I barely stopped my sagging pants from falling before Madison dragged me along. Just before I disappeared after them, one of the guys in the waiting room caught my eye. His smile was knowing. Sympathetic. Pained. Like he knew and understood. Like he'd walked this road before and was saying, *"Buddy, say goodbye to life as you know it. It's all over from here."*

Or maybe he looked at me and saw a stupid kid who shouldn't be having a baby—in which case, he was correct.

I wanted to dig my heels in and stop this forward momentum. Apologize for making a big mistake and beg someone, anyone, to make it go away.

But that didn't happen.

We were guided into a room with strange machines and a paper-covered table.

"Hop on up, and we can get started." The nurse smiled at Madison as she patted the table, making it crinkle.

I stood back, not wanting to be in the way since Madison's mom seemed more than eager to partake in this scan. I wedged myself between other machines and shelving, up against a secluded piece of wall across the room. Present, but not. I was there in body, satisfying these people's

insistence that I be actively involved, but no one seemed to care when I slipped into the shadows.

The nurse folded Madison's shirt back, and I saw the bump for the first time with no clothing in the way. And it was…

… so weird.

I stared, unable to take my eyes off the distinctive mound of stretched ivory skin. She wasn't a big girl, so the shape and protrusion were quite eye-catching. Even with my back pressed to the corner, even though I feigned indifference, I was intrigued. Something—not something; *my baby*—was growing inside her. Right there under that roundness.

The nurse squirted clear gel onto Madison's stomach and shifted her stool closer as she smeared it about with some kind of device in her hand. Everyone's attention was on a small monitor that faced the other direction. Whatever they were looking at, I couldn't see, so my focus was on Madison's belly. I'd seen it plenty from behind her shirts. Watched her touch it and rub it. Understood that there was life growing where I couldn't see. But without clothes, somehow, reality shifted.

Madison's blue eyes grew wide as she watched the screen. They sparkled as she smiled, and her mom looked equally enthralled. I flipped my gaze between them, analyzing their reactions, unsure what my role was or where to put myself. The nurse was talking to them both, but I hadn't been paying attention to her words.

It wasn't until the nurse shifted on her stool and waved me over that I was forced to become involved. "Come on this side, sweetheart. Come see your baby."

My baby. Those words still wouldn't compute.

Hesitation made my limbs heavy, but I shuffled around to the opposite side of the table, and Madison's mom made room for me. I blinked at the monitor they'd been so diligently examining but couldn't understand what I was seeing.

"Are we finding out the sex?" The nurse glanced between Madison and me.

"Yes. Can you tell? I want to know." Madison was so eager, her face glowing with anticipation.

"I can tell. Do you want to know, too?" she asked me.

I shrugged. It was important to Madison.

“You’re having a baby boy.” The nurse beamed, her gaze flicking between us, waiting for a reaction.

Madison said nothing at first. Her smile faltered as she squinted at the screen. “Are you sure?”

“Yup. Look here.” She pointed.

I blinked at the monitor, still not making sense of the image until the nurse explained what we were looking at. Once she made it clear, showing us the baby had male genitalia, she shifted the picture and brought up a broader image.

“Do you see him, sweetheart?” the nurse asked me.

I shook my head, my body warming with shame and embarrassment, still caught on the small detail of our baby being a boy.

“This here is his head.” She traced a finger over the screen. “The baby’s back, legs all curled up, arms, fingers, toes. He looks like he’s sucking his thumb. See that?”

Like a mystery picture, the image on the screen became clear. I saw it —*him*—and the breath caught in my lungs. There he was. Alive. Real. Moving around. Sucking his thumb.

“See this flutter here? Listen. That’s his heart working.”

As she pointed it out, I heard the sound coming from the machine. A steady and fast *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* noise.

His heartbeat.

“That’s your son.”

My son. My baby. My boy.

The tiny human was my baby boy.

That was the day this abstract concept of pregnancy and parenthood and babies became clear. The wires connected in my brain, and the hard truth sank in. I couldn’t look away from the screen. Barely blinking, I watched in awe the small life I’d helped create a few months ago. He was real.

The nurse and Madison chatted about measurements and due dates. I heard none of it. With my own heart fluttering almost as fast as my son’s, all I could do was stare.

Astounded. Shocked. Mesmerized. Intrigued.

And scared fucking shitless.

Because I was going to be a dad, and I was only fifteen years old.

Before leaving the office, the nurse printed off a picture of the baby. One for me and one for Madison. The entire way home, I stared at it, touched it, and wondered at the miracle of life and its creation.

Madison's mom dropped me off at home, and instead of going out boarding or calling my buddies like I'd planned, I lay on my bed, staring at that simple black and white image. For the first time since finding out about the pregnancy, I worried.

How were we going to manage? I knew nothing about babies. I was in high school. Where would we live? How could we afford a baby? What were we doing? Was I supposed to marry her? I didn't even like Madison.

A strangling sense of responsibility wrapped around me, and I knew my life was irrevocably changed forever. There were so many questions battering my adolescent brain, I didn't know what to do with myself.

That was the day I realized baby names and baby clothes and all the other stuff Madison had been talking about for months were actual concerns.

If I was going to be a father, I needed to grow up. No more fucking around. No more skipping school. No more smoking dope behind the dumpster. No more failing tests.

I needed a job.

I needed a plan.

But I didn't know where to begin.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Two

Rhyker

OceanofPDF.com

September 2000

CREED JACKSON KELLY-COLLINS was born on September twenty-seventh, twelve days after I turned sixteen.

And it was the most life-altering experience I'd ever been through.

It was the middle of the night when Madison went into labor. Two in the morning, to be exact. I'd barely slept an hour before being woken up. Over the summer, I'd found a job at a local fast food joint six blocks from my house. The hours were great while we were on summer break, but since school went back the previous month, I'd struggled to balance both my job and schoolwork.

My grades were more important to me, and my bank account wouldn't grow fast enough. So I took every shift I could get my hands on. Night or day. Four hours or twelve. Especially after eyeballing the cost of diapers and formula during a random trip to Walmart.

Fuck, that shit was pricey.

So I was tired all the time.

The previous night, I'd worked from four in the afternoon until midnight, barely dragged my ass home, showered, and crashed before being woken at two in the morning by Mom with news of Madison's labor.

By six a.m., I had been listening to Madison screaming and calling me every name in the book for way too fucking long. Apparently, this whole thing was somehow my fault and my fault alone.

Madison was not a fan of childbirth and had begged for drugs less than an hour after we'd arrived at the hospital. They clearly weren't working because she was inconsolable.

In the delivery room, as she screamed and pushed our son into the world, I stood back in a perpetual state of shock and watched. Madison's mom was by her side coaching since Madison had decided I was the devil incarnate, and she didn't want me near.

That was fine because watching a baby being born was a little more intense than I expected. Hugging the wall in the delivery room, I watched and listened as Madison followed the doctor's instructions and pushed until her face turned purple and the veins in her neck tried to pop. Sweat beaded across her brow, and her once beautiful blonde hair was a wet mess falling

around her face because the elastic her mother had used to tie it back wasn't doing its job.

One minute it was pure chaos.

Then, there he was.

One last push and that baby I'd only known as a moving, kicking bump came into the world screaming just as loud and shrill as his mother.

He looked… gross, to be honest. Covered in goo and blood, face purple and eyes squeezed tight.

But once the nurse wiped him clean and wrapped him in a blue blanket, it was me who she brought him to—not Madison.

Maybe it was because I looked so terrified or maybe it was because I was trying to disappear through the wall. Or perhaps it was simply because I didn't know my place in this room and my uncertainty shone for all to see.

For whatever reason, that nurse recognized my need to be included.

She carried that bundle of blue blankets over to me and placed my son in my arms. His crying had stopped while they were cleaning him, and he squinted, staring at me with mirrored confusion and awe. The poor child looked as lost and overwhelmed as I felt.

"Hi." I adjusted his blanket so I could see his face better. His pudgy cheeks and puckered lips. His long fingers that moved of their own accord next to his face, scratching and seeking. When I brought my finger near his hand, he grasped hold with surprising strength, and I smiled. "I'm your daddy."

Gaping, my eyes misting and with a lump in my throat, I stared at the tiny human in my arms. He weighed all of nothing. So small. So fragile. So vulnerable in this big scary world. An overwhelming sense of protectiveness overcame me, and I cuddled him closer, kissing his forehead and breathing him in.

He was beautiful and perfect.

He was mine.

I knew I would do anything for this little boy in my arms. This boy I'd been so detached from for months. This boy whose ultrasound picture I'd stared at in wonder. This boy who I'd helped name. Who I'd gotten my first job for. Who I'd saved every penny to support.

I vowed from that day forth to be the best dad I could be.

MADISON’S PARENTS TOOK A huge role in Creed’s life. We were thankful because parenthood at sixteen was not easy. My parents, although not indifferent to the baby and responsibility, chose a more passive role. They ensured my participation and encouraged me to remain active, but otherwise, they washed their hands of responsibility. When I brought Creed home on weekends I didn’t work, I took the majority of the weight on my shoulders.

If Creed cried all night—which he did a lot—I was the one to get up and feed him.

If Creed blew a diaper, I was the one to clean up the mess.

If Creed needed to be bathed, fed, walked, held, entertained, it was all on me.

Dad’s words to me were, *you got into this mess, you deal with it.*

A complete contrast to how Madison’s parents functioned. Her parents took the weight off her shoulders constantly, and it showed. Some days, I felt thirty years old compared to her sixteen. We weren’t the same people anymore. Overnight, we’d both changed.

As the weeks and months passed, she started relying on her parents more and more until she only did things that benefited her, or the jobs that were easier to handle. She liked dressing Creed up like a doll and taking him out to show him off, but late-night feedings, dirty diapers, and his diagnosed colic made her miserable.

He was a difficult, cranky baby, and she couldn’t handle it.

It was a few days before the Christmas holidays when Madison decided she wanted to bring Creed to school for the morning since we had an assembly for part of it and classes were lax otherwise. I tried talking her out of it, and her parents tried talking her out of it, but she wouldn’t be swayed.

School was no place for a baby.

But Madison wouldn’t listen.

On the morning in question, Madison decided she needed help—of course. So, begrudgingly, I agreed to show up at her house before school and give her a hand.

I rang the doorbell and wasn’t surprised when her father answered. His smile was tight as he waved me in. The man had accepted me as part of Creed’s life, although I got the sense he was waiting for me to fuck up. Unlike his wife, he never seemed happy to see me.

“Madison is upstairs.”

“Creed too?” I didn’t care about Madison. I cared about my son.

He nodded. “Marge is making his bottle. Why don’t you grab it on your way up.”

Bypassing the stairs to the second floor, I found Madison’s mother in the kitchen warming Creed’s formula. When she saw me, her smile was a fraction warmer than her husband’s, but she looked tired. “Good morning, Rhyker. Creed had a fussy night. Didn’t sleep much. He might need to go down for an earlier nap.”

“Was something wrong or just that colic thing still?” I didn’t understand when the doctor had called it that the previous month when we’d taken him in. We’d been concerned when Creed never stopped crying. He got himself so worked up sometimes he turned purple and looked like he forgot to breathe. “Is he okay? I thought he was starting to sleep a little better.”

“He’s fine, hon. Babies are like this sometimes. I think he’s having another growth spurt. That’s all. His colic is passing. He just seems hungrier lately. Here.” She handed me a warm bottle which I tested on the inside of my wrist out of habit like I’d been taught. “I made a few extra ounces to fill his belly good and full.”

“Thank you.”

Creed was almost three months old and was a chubby little guy, full of smiles when he wasn’t full of tears. Every time I saw him, it pulled at something in my chest. My heart ached and beat a little faster. He had Madison’s striking blue eyes but my brown hair—although it was thinning and falling out, another something that was apparently normal. The doctor said it would grow back. He also had Madison’s high cheekbones but my wider lips and straight nose. Mom said he was a perfect blend of the two of us.

I wandered upstairs, hearing Madison’s music blaring from her speakers. The music just barely drowned out Creed’s cries, and anger surged inside me. I picked up my pace and shoved her door open without knocking, letting it clatter against the wall.

“Rhyker! What the hell!?”

Madison spun and covered her bare chest with one arm as she scrambled for her shirt and bra with the other all while turning her back to me.

“Creed’s crying,” I said in his defense.

“He’s fine. He always cries. Fuck, I’m changing. Get out.”

Like I gave a shit about her half-naked body. Not like I hadn’t seen it before. Not like it did *anything* for me. Ignoring her protests, I followed the cries to Creed’s playpen in the corner—a place Madison liked to plunk him and forget about him—and scooped him up into my arms. His cheeks were crimson and wet with tears, and he wore only a soggy diaper. With no clothes on, his fair skin was covered in goosebumps, and his tiny fists were balled and shaking as he shrieked.

Growling under my breath, I cradled him against my chest. I dug through a half-full laundry basket of clean clothes sitting on Madison’s bed, searching for something—*anything*—to put on his shivering body. I pulled out a fuzzy onesie with trucks on it, a tiny pair of frog socks, snagged a fresh diaper from a pile on the dresser, then jetted out of the room again.

“He’s not wearing that today,” Madison hollered over her music as I slammed her door.

News flash, yes he was.

In the hallway, I veered to the left and went into Creed’s nursery. I laid him gently on the changing table and shushed him as I freshened his diaper, which was saturated and hanging halfway down his legs. Before I got his onesie on him, Madison burst into the room—finally dressed—and threw a different outfit at me.

“He’s not wearing a onesie to school, idiot. That will look stupid. Put this on him.”

“He’s freezing. Why was he in just a diaper? That’s probably why he was crying.”

She rolled her eyes. “He’s *always* crying. The kid never shuts up.” She took the onesie from my hand as her attention flashed to Creed. She wrinkled her nose, pointing. “Pull his diaper higher so we can’t see that ugly mark.”

I scowled and did no such thing. Creed had been born with a large port-wine stain birthmark over his hip on the right side. It covered a large section of his upper leg, starting at the side of his bum, wrapping around to his front, and dipping as low as the crease of his leg. It rose to just above his diaper line. The doctor said there was nothing to be concerned about, but Madison hated it.

Loathed it.

Every time she voiced her opinion, I wanted to throttle her.

Ignoring her comment, I continued to dress the baby in the undershirt, pants, and sweater she'd thrown at me before picking Creed up again and cuddling him to my chest, bouncing him and shushing him. He sniffled and clung to my shirt, burying his face in my shoulder as he calmed.

Madison tried to take him, but I turned my back on her, wrapping Creed more snugly in my arms before leaving the room.

"We'll be downstairs waiting. He needs his bottle."

I wasn't sure how I felt about Creed becoming a show-and-tell spectacle today, but I'd lost that fight already. I didn't foresee a good day ahead, especially if he'd had a rough night and morning already. But you couldn't tell Madison anything. It was just another example of how she saw Creed as an object and not a baby. Her needs outweighed his every time.

Rocking him in the rocking chair in the Kelly's living room, I fed my son as I waited for Madison to finish getting ready. Creed sucked back all nine ounces of his bottle greedily and gave me a hearty, wet burp afterward that thankfully didn't make a mess over my shoulder.

We were on the floor, lying side by side, playing and laughing when Madison emerged from upstairs.

"Dad, we're going to be late."

She tossed me Creed's diaper bag and jacket and set about finding her own without offering to assist. I was used to it and didn't argue anymore. Once Creed was bundled, I found my own jacket and carried Creed out to the car, securing him in his car seat for the trip to the school.

It went over exactly how I expected.

The moment we arrived, Madison took Creed and skipped away, uncaring about anything else so she could show him off to her friends. She left the diaper bag behind, so I snagged it and followed after her. It would only be a matter of time before she realized she needed it.

When I found her inside, she yanked the bag from my grasp and turned her back on me, dismissing me entirely as her friends gathered around and lost their heads over Creed. They cooed and babbled, pretending he was some plaything instead of a baby.

But he was changed and fed and happy at the moment, so his complacency and smiles were exactly what Madison wanted.

Until those smiles and his good mood vanished, and things went downhill.

When ten o’clock rolled around, I wasn’t surprised to have the Christmas movie we were watching in science class interrupted by a knock on the classroom door. A familiar wailing echoed down the halls when my teacher answered the door, and I sat straighter, teeth on edge, instincts kicking in since I knew my son’s cry.

Before being told, I was out of my seat and taking Creed from an irritated Madison who looked more frazzled by the minute.

“I don’t know what his problem is. I fed him and changed him, but he just never shuts up.”

I bounced Creed in my arms and waved for her to give me the diaper bag that was slung over her shoulder. “He’s probably tired. Did you think of that? Your mom said he didn’t sleep much last night.”

Madison sneered but didn’t argue or object to me taking him. She gladly handed him over along with the diaper bag before strutting away, leaving me with a screaming baby in the middle of school. My teacher, Mr. Henderson, studied me a moment, a crease appearing on his already wrinkled forehead.

“Do you want to go to the teachers’ lounge?”

I sighed, knowing I couldn’t take a wailing baby into the classroom when everyone was engaged in a movie. “Sure. Thank you. I told her not to bring him.”

With an unhappy Creed in my arms, thankful we weren’t learning anything new today, I headed to the teachers’ lounge to try and take care of the problem. This was Madison’s great idea, but, I was learning, it was me who was always summoned to fix it. Or her parents—but they weren’t here.

She was only happy so long as Creed was happy—and babies just didn’t function that way. Especially Creed.

In the lounge, I bounced my exhausted boy in my arms while he carried on. It was twenty minutes later when he finally cried himself to sleep. I collapsed on the couch and closed my eyes, letting him nuzzle against my chest. His tiny hiccupping gasps and sleep-slackened body tugged my heartstrings. He hadn’t asked for this.

Life with a baby was taxing, but I was doing my best.

Some days, I wasn’t sure my best was good enough.

I GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL late since I was so far behind with failed courses from previous years. It was the summer before I turned

nineteen when I finally got my diploma. Creed was almost three.

Regret was a real thing.

If I'd known then I was going to be a young dad, I might not have blown off my studies.

Then again—if I'd been more aware of consequences, I'd have worn a fucking condom all those years ago.

But I wouldn't wish Creed away. He'd become my whole world in those three short years.

I didn't have job prospects or any plans to attend college, so once summer began, I got a second job at the local gas station to help pay for all the things Madison said Creed needed.

Clothing, diapers—because he struggled with toilet training—food, toys, medicine—because he had chronic ear infections—and anything else Madison deemed a necessity.

We had our own self-made arrangement for custody. Creed came with me every weekend and two nights a week. Otherwise, he was with his mother. Which meant he was being cared for primarily by his grandparents since Madison preferred a social life over being a responsible parent. I wasn't ignorant. The woman was rarely around. Plus, she had goals to attend college in the fall, which placed Creed in her parents' and my care even more.

We both lived at home still, but I'd been making plans to get my own place. My parents weren't much help, and Creed and I disrupted their lives. However, living alone cost a lot of money. I needed more hours at work or a better-paying job, but it was a goal I worked hard to achieve.

"Did you pack his swimmers?"

"Yes."

"Earplugs?"

"Yes."

"Blankie?"

Madison rolled her eyes. "Yes, Rhyker, everything is packed. Just take him and go."

I bit my tongue and called over her shoulder. "Creed! Daddy's ready. Come on, little man."

Running feet sounded from the upper level of the house and then scurried faster than was safe down the stairs.

"Slow down, kiddo."

“Daddy! We go swimmin’? I wanna splash.”

He jumped from the last step right into my outstretched arms, and I swung him up onto my hip. His hair had lightened significantly since birth and was closer to his mother’s blonde. Madison kept it longer and it hung in his eyes with not a single inherited curl from her.

His lips were always excessively rosy against his pale skin, and his lashes were long over his piercing blue eyes. Madison had called him girly more than once, and it’d been a feat not laying into her about the comment. He was barely three, for fuck’s sake. Who said shit like that about a kid?

“We’re going to the splash pad. Are you excited?”

Creed clung to my neck and squealed his delight, bouncing in my arms with an abundance of energy he carried everywhere he went.

“When did he pee last?” I asked Madison.

She shrugged and peered over her shoulder, calling into the back of the house. “Mom? When did Creed use the potty?”

Biting back my comment, wondering why she didn’t know these things firsthand, I listened as Marge called back. “About forty minutes ago.”

I set Creed on his feet and looked him in the eyes. “Do you need to try making pee-pee before we go?”

He shook his head vehemently, sending his bangs into his face before bouncing up and down in place with all that pent-up energy he never seemed able to expel.

I shifted my focus to Madison. “Is he in a Pull-Up or underwear?”

Again, she whipped her head around and called the question to her mother. Not waiting for a response, I peeked down the back of Creed’s pants to get the answer myself. Pull-Up.

Why did I bother asking Madison anything?

My car was safe from pee accidents, at least.

Creed loved the water, which was why the splash pad became our favorite stop that summer. It was free, wet, refreshing, and entertaining for an almost-three-year-old who never stopped moving.

The fountains rained water, the wading pool was calf-deep, and the sprinklers showered us from fun animal shapes. Plus, there were other kids all around for Creed to interact with. He was a social butterfly if not a little overwhelming at times. His excess energy was why I kept him active on our days together. Otherwise, he destroyed the house and upset my parents.

We ran under the spray, chasing each other around the splash pad, flopping to our bellies in the small wading pool, and laughing as we blew bubbles, kicked our feet, and dunked our faces under the water.

Some of the other kids watched and copied, clearly entertained by our games. It was rare for the other parents to follow their kids into the water, but I made a point of showing Creed a good time.

By the time midmorning rolled around, I had six children surrounding me, dancing under the bigger fountain as it rained on our heads and jumping into the wading pool to see who could make the biggest splash.

Creed wanted to play chase, so I ran in circles while he giggled and did his best to tackle me to the ground. Round and round we went, all over the splash pad, weaving among children and fountains as Creed squealed his delight. Before long, I had a train of kids all trying to catch me and dunk me in the water.

By noon, it took a lot of encouraging to drag Creed out of the water and to our picnic blanket, but I knew from experience, if I didn't feed him soon, his hunger would make him cranky and unbearable.

Wrapped in an oversized towel, wet hair sticking out in all directions, Creed munched on his peanut butter and jelly as he watched the other kids run around. His little lips were tinged blue, but he insisted he wasn't cold. Regardless, I wrapped my towel around him as well to give him added warmth.

"We go in again, Daddy?"

"Maybe after lunch. We'll see."

But the longer he sat still, the heavier his eyes became, and I knew he wouldn't last much longer. I studied his face, his round cheeks, pale skin, and messy hair, and I smiled. Some days, it was hard to believe he was mine. That I'd created him.

A shadow crossed our blanket, drawing me from the moment. I looked up, shielding my eyes from the blazing sun as it silhouetted a man standing beside us. Noticing my compromised vision, he shifted to the side, blocking the sun so I didn't have to squint.

The man, probably in his mid-twenties, grinned down at me, hands on his hips. Water droplets trailed down his chest as his swim trunks hung low on his hips, saturated and making a puddle, telling me he'd come from the water.

"Hey," I said, returning his smile, unsure what he needed.

“Hi. I don’t mean to interrupt, but I have to ask. I’ve seen you here with this little guy a few times this summer, and I can’t decide if you are just the most perfect big brother in the world or his babysitter.”

I sighed internally but kept my smile in place. He wasn’t the first person to assume I was Creed’s big brother or nanny. It was far easier to comprehend than to assume I was his dad. Of all the families at the splash pad, I was by far the youngest adult.

Creed saved me answering when he blurted, “It’s my daddy.”

The man’s brows winged up, but he hid his startled reaction quickly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize. You just… didn’t seem old enough to have a son.”

“It’s okay. I had Creed pretty young, so it’s a common assumption. I’m Rhyker, by the way.” I held out my hand to shake.

“Emmet. Nice to meet you. Callie, the one in the frilly yellow bathing suit, she’s my little girl. Single dad, you?”

My gaze traveled to the young girl who looked about Creed’s age. She was one of the kids who’d been playing with us earlier. Her brown hair was pulled into pigtails, but even wet, I could tell she had a lot of curls.

“Um… Yeah. Same. Shared custody, though.”

“Mind if I join you?”

I shuffled over on the blanket, and Emmet sat with us, facing the pool so he could watch his daughter.

“Can I be completely rude and ask how old you are?”

I chuckled and helped Creed push the straw into his juice box when he started to whine. “I’ll be nineteen in September. Creed will be three twelve days later. He was born just after I turned sixteen.”

“Wow. That must have been tough.”

I shrugged. It was my life, and I’d long ago accepted it.

“I just mean, I’m twenty-five and I’ve struggled to do this all on my own since Callie was born. Her mother wanted to give her up, but I didn’t. So I claimed full custody right away. I can’t imagine doing it at sixteen.”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I stayed silent.

As an awkward tension built around us, Creed’s head began to bob on his shoulders, and the juice box slipped from his fingers. Grateful for something to do, I carefully removed the mashed-up sandwich from one hand and the juice box from the other. Setting them aside, I found a wipe in the diaper bag and cleaned his fingers. When he started to fuss, I brought

him onto my lap where he wrapped himself around me, resting his head on my chest. Before I could get comfortable, he was fast asleep.

"Tuckered out," Emmet commented, a slight glimmer in his green eyes as he watched us.

"That's why I bring him here. He loves the water, and it drains all his energy. He sleeps better when he's worn out."

Emmet chuckled. "You're good with kids. I think you drained all their energy. Not just Creed's. All these parents should be grateful. All the times I've come here and you're one of the few who is willing to go all in. Most stand on the sidelines, happy for a break."

After all the times I'd thought myself an inadequate parent—too young or too stupid or too unprepared—Emmet's words hit a spot deep within, a spot that few people realized needed to be coddled from time to time. The part of me that sought reassurance and recognition. His comment made rarely felt pride bloom and expand in my chest. Sometimes, it was nice to hear I wasn't a complete fuck-up.

"Thanks." I kissed the top of Creed's head and savored the close bond we shared. "I should probably pack him up and get him home for a nap. Otherwise, I'll be sitting here all afternoon just like this."

Emmet chuckled as he pulled himself to his feet. Without hesitation, he helped me tidy the lunch mess and fold the big blanket since my hands were full of a toddler. After he handed me the big bag I'd brought, loaded up with all our gear, he held out his hand again.

I returned his handshake, but he held on that little bit longer, not releasing our hold for an extra few beats as he worked his way up to speaking again. There was something unspoken in the connection, but I couldn't make out what.

"It was nice to meet you, Rhyker. We… we should get a coffee together sometime. Maybe take the kids to the park or something." Emmet shuffled and cut his eyes to the pool and his daughter as he bit his lip. A spike of nerves seemed to overtake him, and I tilted my head, examining him. Only after a heavy pause did he look back in anticipation, waiting for an answer.

It hit me all at once, and I barely stopped myself from flinching. A flash of understanding surfaced. It was in Emmet's smile, in the spark of curiosity behind his luminous green eyes, in the way he studied my face, and in the nervous tone of his voice. I knew what it all equated to, but I was so blindsided by the realization, I didn't respond immediately.

Since sleeping with Madison and finding out about Creed, any and all thoughts of relationships or my sexuality had been put on the back burner. Being a good father was my sole focus, so my needs and my desires had been packed away.

I knew I was gay, but I hadn't been given a chance to explore that part of myself. Creed came first. Always. Ensuring I was earning a good paycheck and getting good grades came second—but even that came back to Creed. Besides, I was still closeted and unsure if or when I would tell people. Seeking relations with other men had been off the table.

How had Emmet figured it out? Was he assuming? Hoping? Did he know for sure? Was I reading something that wasn't there?

"I'm sorry. That was probably weird. Never mind," Emmet sputtered when I didn't answer fast enough and only managed gaping and blinking.

"No! Um… I'd love to. I have Creed every weekend. How about next Saturday?"

"That'd be great. Want to start off here in the morning and maybe move to a park for an early lunch?"

"Perfect."

Emmet's eyes shone, and he dashed his attention away again when the moment got too intense. "See you then." He waved and walked toward the pool and his daughter.

Unlike when he'd first arrived at my blanket, I took a half a second to admire him. He was taller and older and not bad looking. He felt miles out of my league. I was a scrawny kid of barely nineteen. I'd cleaned up my act in the past three years, but I wasn't anything special.

I didn't know what he saw in me, but I wasn't about to question it. Madison had been openly dating for a while.

Except, she wasn't trying to hide her sexuality from the whole world.

Part of me still wasn't ready for that unveiling. Maybe when I'd had more time to adjust to it myself, more time to explore it, I'd be ready to tell people. The last thing I wanted was for the potential backlash to affect Creed.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Three

Rhyker

OceanofPDF.com

November 2005

“WHAT SPECIAL, GLOWING moment are you waiting for, Rhyker? It’s been two years. Two! You said to give it time, but how much time? This is fucking ridiculous.” The knife came down on the cutting board with more and more force as Emmet decimated the poor vegetables for our stir-fry, his face a picture of anger. “Our kids aren’t stupid. How on earth no one has figured it out yet is beyond me.”

With my arms crossed, leaning back against the counter, I worked my jaw loose and tried to stop grinding my teeth. We’d had this discussion at least a hundred times over the past year. Twice in the past week. It was exhausting and annoying. I’d never made promises about coming out, not once, but Emmet seemed to assume enough time had passed that I should feel ready.

“They’re five. They don’t know what’s going on between us. We’re just friends, for all they understand.”

Emmet slammed the knife on the counter and spun, one hand gripping the counter’s edge with a white-knuckled grip as his green eyes blazed. “Exactly, they’re five, and they don’t understand. Five-year-olds don’t know that telling people their daddies share a bed and kiss means anything. To them, it’s not a big deal. They see it all the time. Callie said it to my mother the other day during a completely random conversation like it was no big deal. But my mother knows I’m bisexual. What if Creed tells Madison or his grandparents? Is that how you want people to find out?”

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “No. Of course not. It’s just… I have a bad feeling about this. Not my parents—I couldn’t give a fuck what they think. Since Creed was born, they’ve been stone-cold with me. Since I moved out, they rarely even see him. But her parents… They do so much. I’ve spent years gaining their respect and proving I’m not some stupid fuck-up, yet I just get this vibe that they won’t like it.”

“They’ll like it less if they find out from Creed.”

I had no doubt. In fact, the idea of it scared the shit out of me. Emmet and I hadn’t been careful. I knew that. The kids were three when we got together. Two years in, they were used to sleepovers at each other’s houses and watching their daddies be affectionate. They didn’t understand the implications of letting it slip to the wrong people.

My phone rang where I'd left it on the table, interrupting the tense moment. Emmet dropped his chin when he realized I would use the interruption as an excuse to curb our argument. But I was tired of this endless discussion and never felt closer to an answer each time it came up.

I snagged my phone and walked into the living room, ignoring his deep sigh.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Rhyker Collins?"

"It is. Who's this?"

"It's Amanda Pommel from Green Valley Elementary. I'm calling about Creed."

I stopped short, my muscles growing rigid, my heart skipping. "Is everything okay? I thought the emergency contact was set up as Madison Kelly."

I didn't have Creed during the day on weekdays, and we'd agreed when he started kindergarten that Madison and her parents would be the first contacts because I worked most days. My being off today was a rare thing.

"She is, but we've been unable to contact her. Mr. Collins, we're having some difficulty with Creed in the classroom, and he's needed to be removed to the principal's office again."

"Again?"

"That's right."

"Well… how many times has he been in there?"

"This week? Three."

It was Thursday. What the fuck?!

"This school term? At least two dozen."

"Two dozen?" *Why didn't I know about this?* "What is the issue exactly?" My blood boiled, but I couldn't decide if it was anger at Madison for keeping me in the dark or anger at the school for claiming my child had *issues*. The protective side of me raged forward, and I was ready to go to war before I even understood the problem.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss this over the phone. I've been asked to set up a parent meeting with Mr. Ward, the principal, as soon as possible. Ms. Kelly hasn't gotten back to me with a good time and date, so it was suggested we contact you to see if you'd be more flexible with the idea. The longer we leave this, the worse it might get."

I bit back aggressive words that would get me nowhere and blew out a steadying breath. “Absolutely. When can I come in?”

“Are you available tomorrow afternoon at one thirty?”

“I’ll make myself available, but what about today, right now? You said he’s in the office?”

“He is. Mr. Ward will chat with him, and if he can calm Creed down, we’ll get him back in class.”

“Forget it. I’m on my way. If he’s being disruptive, maybe he needs a break.”

She didn’t argue, which told me just what kind of problem Creed was being. I ended the call and tilted my head back to stare at the ceiling as I emptied my lungs, working on letting go of my frustration.

“Em, I gotta run. Creed is having a problem at school, and Madison won’t answer her phone.”

Emmet appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, dishtowel slung over his shoulder, his earlier anger long drained away and concern taking its place.

“Everything okay?”

I shook my head. “He’s a handful. He’s always been a handful, and the school can’t deal with him, apparently.”

Emmet remained quiet, but I knew what he wasn’t saying. Creed was more than a handful. He’d been steadily getting worse over the past two years. We’d joked many times that he was a wild child with a short fuse, but it was more than that. The kid literally couldn’t sit still. Not to eat, not to play, not to watch TV, not to have a story. Nothing.

He was always moving, like his brain wouldn’t shut off. His temper was raw and would be triggered by the smallest provocation. And if that happened, look out. Trying to force him to complete tasks only set him off as well. He couldn’t focus on getting dressed, brushing his teeth, or playing with anything for more than five minutes before he was up and running. Always moving. Always racing. Even conversations with him could be maddening. He talked too fast and regularly didn’t finish his thoughts. And his listening skills were nonexistent.

But that wasn’t all. Over the past year, I’d begun to notice strange quirks I didn’t understand. He’d cover his ears at random and close his eyes. I’d thought it was just a childish means of tuning me out when he was angry. But he did it even when I wasn’t in the same room as him. He did it

at the pool when he had lessons. He did it at the park. He did it while watching TV. Sometimes, he'd run and hide immediately after the ear-covering and eye-closing strangeness. Always somewhere dark. Under a bush at the park, in the equipment room at the pool, his closet, under his bed, or in the pantry.

He'd scream and hit himself in anger.

Then there were the growing tantrums surrounding food. He gagged and threw stuff across the table if it was something he didn't like. And God help me if I forced him to eat. You'd think I beat the child, the way he carried on when all I'd done was ask him to try the oatmeal.

More times than not, if forced, he'd get so worked up he vomited everywhere.

When I'd brought my concerns up to Madison's parents, they'd seemed to imply it had to do with us being too young when we had him. Which I made out as them saying we were bad parents. But fuck if I didn't change my whole life for Creed. I wasn't a bad father, and I resented the implication.

Plus, when Creed was at their place, it was *them* who were raising him, not Madison. His behavior was the same under their roof. So it didn't make sense. If it was parenting, weren't they partly to blame too?

Now the school was having problems, and I was just learning about it.

Emmet's hand on my arm drew me from my thoughts. "Rhy, he's just a busy kid. Some kids are like that. I'm sure he'll grow out of it. He's only five. He has too much energy. So what? Lots of kids do."

"It's more than that."

He knew it, and I knew it.

"He bounces houses a lot," Emmet continued. "He gets different rules everywhere he goes. Can you blame him for being reactive? You and Madison are two very different people, and you don't parent him the same."

"I know. I just… I do my best, but what if my best isn't good enough? I was sixteen when he was born. What if I fucked him up? There… Something isn't right."

"Stop it. There is nothing wrong with him. You're a great dad. Fuck Madison's parents for making you feel any less. She's the one who can't take time for her son. Creed is lucky to have you."

I nodded, wishing I could feel as reassured. Call it a gut instinct. Call it what you will, but I saw things in Creed that worried me. Worried me to my

core. “I gotta go. Look, about before—”

“Never mind. We can talk about it later. I’m only worried you’ll get hurt in the long run. I’m not being an ass to be an ass.”

“I know. Just… don’t push me. When I’m ready, I’ll handle it. If something happens and it all blows up in my face, you can reserve the right to say ‘I told you so.’”

Emmet chuckled. “I won’t do that. I’ll wait if you need me to. I’m sorry I’m pressuring you. Now go. I’ll finish making lunch.” Emmet kissed me tenderly and ran his thumb along my jaw. “Love you,” he whispered.

“You too.”

EMMET’S PATIENCE RAN out one year later. He’d never wanted to be dragged into closet-living. He wanted to be open about our relationship and move in together, and I didn’t. It was a bone of contention between us that came to a head one cold winter morning and ended with us breaking up.

I probably should have been more upset except there were too many other things going on in my life for me to worry about it. Primarily, Creed. His behavior had gotten so out of hand, the school said if we didn’t take him to a doctor, then we’d be asked to keep him home.

So I spent the better part of his sixth year seeking counseling, talking with doctors, behavior specialists, psychiatrists, and anyone who would listen simply so I could get Creed the help he needed.

We tried altering his diet, setting him a rigid routine, and using visual aids to assist with communication—even though he spoke clearly. Unless his emotions hit extremes or he became overwhelmed with stress, then he didn’t. When that happened, his sentences came out choppy and broken like he couldn’t find the right words to articulate what was wrong. The more his ability to communicate was compromised, the more frustrated he became, and the more violent his reactions. Utter destruction of his environment was becoming all too frequent.

Madison was pretty passive about the whole thing, but thankfully, her parents agreed he needed help and went along with most of the treatments we tried.

And oh, the hoops we jumped through.

“He’s on the spectrum,” one doctor said after listening to a brief, twenty-minute explanation of Creed’s behaviors.

“He’s bi-polar,” said another.

“It’s because he doesn’t have rules.”

“Bad parenting.”

“Bad parenting.”

“Bad parenting.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to believe them or that I disregarded their suggestions, but I didn’t feel any of them took enough time to truly break down all we were seeing. To truly understand Creed and his struggles.

Until we met Doctor Padina.

He listened. He watched. For months and months and months. He introduced us to a well-known child behavior specialist. We spoke with special needs therapists. We examined every angle and corner and curve to get to the root of the problem.

It was during Creed’s seventh year, after talking with more doctors and specialists than I could count, that we finally got a firm diagnosis. Severe attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, combined with a moderate sensory processing disorder commonly seen in children on the spectrum. The two disorders together had been the reason diagnosing him had been so challenging.

Doctor Padina reassured us that he didn’t feel Creed fell within the flexible parameters of Asperger’s. He didn’t disregard it completely but was convinced Creed’s difficulties were more specific to ADHD and SPD.

“Now, Mr. Collins, I want you to understand that I’m not just slapping a label on Creed. ADHD has been quite stigmatized over the years, which is why I was hesitant to focus on it directly or diagnose him the minute we met. It has been used by some professionals as an easy answer or Band-Aid solution to appease parents or give a diagnosis when there is none. It’s troublesome and tends to invalidate its seriousness. I hate slapping labels on children, and I hate more pumping them full of unnecessary drugs.

“We’ve been around the block many times with Creed. Tried many things. Nothing we do makes a difference. His behavior is textbook ADHD to the extreme. The reason it’s been a struggle to accurately pinpoint is because of the mixture of SPD you’re seeing. The symptoms go back to his infancy. All you’ve shared about his growing up can be pinpointed to these two things.

“Creed struggles to filter stimuli from his environment. When he’s stressed, his senses work in overdrive. The lights can feel blazing and

assaulting. Even small noises you or I don't notice can feel like a freight train in his head. Food textures can produce the same intense, overwhelming discomfort. It sounds strange, but to Creed, these things are an overload to his system. With these two disorders working side by side, anytime Creed finds himself in a stressful situation or the least bit overwhelmed, his behaviors come out because he doesn't have tools to cope. What you and his teachers have shared with me tells me Creed will likely get worse before he gets better unless we intervene. Give him tools. Help him build a framework so he knows how to handle the overstimulation he feels all the time. He needs help."

I studied the man with the bushy mustache, wireframed glasses, and oversized nose. His gray hair was thinning on top, and his ironed shirt strained the buttons where it pulled over his round belly. He'd been straightforward this whole time and never pulled his punches. I trusted him and believed in everything he said, but it hurt hearing my child had something wrong with him. Something that couldn't be corrected easily. Something that caused suffering.

Madison hadn't bothered coming to this appointment, but her mother sat motionless beside me, the same scowl on her face I'd grown accustomed to over the years. Would she agree? Would her mindset allow it? She still figured Creed's behavior was parenting most days and had gone along with these doctor's visits likely to prove a point.

It took everything in me not to turn to her and say, "I told you so."

"What are you suggesting?" I asked, refolding my legs the opposite way in an attempt to get comfortable. The air in the room felt overly thick and warm. My shirt stuck to my body with the amount I was sweating. I didn't like it and wanted to step outside so I could breathe.

"I'm suggesting a combination of things. First, a low-dose pill to help regulate the chemical imbalance in Creed's brain. It should help slow him down and hopefully make it easier for him to control his behavior. Likely, I'll need to adjust the dose a time or two to get the right balance, but I hope to keep the dose minimal. Too much medication and we could end up with a lethargic child. You don't want that either. We don't want to stamp out his personality. We simply want to help him manage when he can't.

"Secondly, I'm suggesting an educational therapist work with him in school. They can help give Creed other coping skills for when his senses overwhelm him and remove him from class when he needs a break. He

might always need a little extra help in school. It's not uncommon for children in Creed's situation to have some learning disabilities. It doesn't have to be a barrier. With guidance, he can go far. Do well."

"What if you're wrong?" Marge sat forward, the look on her face unreadable.

"I don't believe I am. I have a lot of experience in the field of child behavior, and it's rare to come across such a classic case of ADHD, especially one combined with SPD. I'd hoped we could solve this puzzle without medical intervention, but in Creed's case, we can't. What he's experiencing isn't something he can willfully change on his own because it's caused by a chemical imbalance in his system. His brain doesn't work the same way yours or mine does. That's just a fact. You'd be doing Creed a disservice to ignore this treatment."

"We're not ignoring it. We're on board," I cut in, shooting Marge an irritated glare.

"We'll discuss it." The edge in Marge's voice drew the doctor's attention.

"With all due respect, Mrs. Kelly, Mr. Collins and your daughter will be the ones making any final decisions on the matter. I understand your concern as a grandparent, but they are the decision-makers for Creed."

"And Madison told me to do what I felt I needed to." I matched Marge's tone, giving the doctor a tight smile. "And I think it's time we try medication since everything else we've done doesn't work. The longer we wait, the more we allow Creed to suffer, and that isn't fair."

Marge huffed in exasperation as she sat back again, lips pursed and eyes narrowed at the doctor. "Fine. Drug my grandchild."

I resented that she didn't see the possibility that it would help Creed. It wasn't like I came to this decision lightly. We'd been at this for over a year. But, again, I was just a stupid fucking kid. What did I know? My goals were clearly to make Creed's life harder, not easier. Some days, I thought she still saw me as the sixteen-year-old boy and not the twenty-three-year-old man I'd become.

Imagine my inner glee when six months later, Creed was an entirely different child. He wasn't without problems—far, far from it—but the low dose of Adderall he'd been prescribed had made a huge difference in his life. He still had an excessive amount of energy, and at times, he became overstimulated and lost control of his temper, but overall, he could focus

better and seemed happier. The educational therapist was a godsend too. Creed liked Stacey, the woman who came three days a week to work with him in class, and he excelled like never before.

The school was pleased. I was pleased. The Kellys thought I was nothing more than a cruel father drugging my child and allowing some strange woman to fill his head with garbage. Whatever. I was done listening to them berate my parenting skills. For once, I wished they'd look at their daughter and see who had actually become the better parent in this whole situation. Which of the two of us truly had Creed's best interests at heart?

Not her.

I MET CAM WHEN Creed was eight. He coached our kids' soccer team, so I spent endless hours in the hot sun, watching practices and games and admiring the hot coach. Cam in tight soccer shorts was enough to ensure Creed never missed a practice.

Cam was super fit. Tall and lean with moderate muscle definition, and an ass to kill for. He had dark brown hair which he wore cut short, and eyes that drove me wild when I caught him looking over at me. For a whole summer, after every practice, we chatted about nothing and anything while our kids ran around the field. We laughed together and got along really well. It wasn't until the soccer season ended that we decided to have an unofficial date.

I wasn't sure he was gay or bi but had an inkling. Our growing bond felt like a lot more than simple friendship.

One date and I had my answer.

Problem was, I was still deep in the closet, and Cam wasn't. My only saving grace was our kids became good friends, so it gave us a lot of excuses to be together.

"Dad, is Arik coming over soon?" Creed swung his feet back and forth as he picked at his crackers and cheese, not really eating them. He was a tiny kid, and his feet didn't reach the ground yet. They were always moving. Swinging. Kicking. Expelling the energy stuck inside his little body.

"After lunch. I told you. Eat, please."

"Can we play PlayStation?"

"No. We're going to the field to kick the ball around for an hour first. You're too hyped up for TV. Maybe after. He and Cam are gonna spend the

night again.”

Creed’s eyes bugged, and his chin dropped in an exaggerated look of astonishment. “Really?”

“Yes, sir. Do you guys want to camp out in the living room?”

“Yes!” Creed’s grin monopolized his entire face, his piercing blue eyes shimmering in the overhead lighting. “Are you and Cam gonna sleep in the living room too?”

I hesitated then smiled. “Nah. We’re too big for campouts. You don’t want the grown-ups around.”

“Is Cam gonna sleep in your bed again?”

I turned back to the apple I was cutting—and peeling because skin made Creed gag—and spun answers around my head. Cam had spent the night a few times, but Creed wasn’t a stupid kid.

“He wouldn’t fit in your bed, so yeah. Not a big deal. Daddy can share.”

Creed grew quiet, so I peeked over my shoulder. He nibbled a cracker and seemed lost in thought, feet still swinging back and forth.

“Is Cam your boyfriend?”

Stunned by the straightforward question, I froze, staring at the apple as my shoulders stiffened. “What do you mean, kiddo? Cam is my friend, just like Arik is your friend.”

“But he’s a boy and your friend too, so isn’t that the same? Arik is my boyfriend, and Cam is yours. Mom has boyfriends, sometimes, and they sleep in her bed. She kisses them, though. You don’t kiss Cam, do you?”

My chest tightened, restricting my airflow. Fists clenched, thoughts racing, I couldn’t decide if I was supposed to lie to my kid or tell him the truth. If I told him the truth, would he tell Madison? Would that open Pandora’s box and set off a chain of events I still couldn’t decide if I was ready for?

I dropped the knife and collected the cut apple wedges, bringing them to the table and placing all but one on Creed’s plate. The other wedge I popped into my mouth so I didn’t have to answer immediately. As I chewed, Creed’s big blue eyes stared at me questioningly. We kept his hair shaved to the scalp now—for reasons—and it made his eyes pop even more.

Swallowing, I shrugged and gestured to Creed’s plate. “Cam’s just a friend. Nothing more to say. Eat up.”

Creed pursed his lips and arranged his apple slices on his plate to make a pattern, more interested in playing with his food than eating it. I thought he'd finally dismissed the conversation until he looked up with a big smile.

"Arik said kissing is gross even though we're boyfriends. He said we can do it when we're bigger maybe."

For a second, I panicked, unsure what he meant. I didn't want to read too deeply into the statement but wondered nonetheless if it was simple childhood curiosity or if my son was discovering something about himself. Was eight too young to know if you were gay? I didn't think so. Although, I was in high school when I knew for sure. Seeing as Creed seemed to understand friendships and relationships on a general scale, I assumed he was simply addressing how close his and Arik's friendship was and nothing more.

Cam was less concerned about my closeted lifestyle than Emmet had ever been. He was fine keeping our intimacy behind closed doors and acting the part of buddies around our kids and families. What didn't work in our favor was the sharp observational skills of two eight-year-old boys who had apparently grown curious about their dads' *friendship.*

On September thirtieth, the weekend after Creed's ninth birthday, we had a slumber party to celebrate and took the boys to laser tag and out to McDonald's for dinner. Once they'd settled with the PlayStation and junk food in the living room, Cam and I escaped to the balcony to share a couple of beers in private.

The boys were occupied, the blinds over the sliding door to the balcony were drawn shut, and we thought we were alone.

"What are the chances I can convince you to go away with me sometime?" Cam wedged himself between my legs where I stood leaning back against the railing.

Beer in one hand, his other slid up my side and rested comfortably on my hip. We were close, and I wrapped my free arm around his middle, tugging him against me and stealing a quick kiss.

"What did you have in mind? I'm not sure what kind of time I can get off work. Or how much I can afford to take off, for that matter."

Cam flicked his tongue against my lips, taking a deeper kiss, tasting of the beer we'd been drinking. "Just a long weekend. A weekend you're already off, maybe. That way, you only need to take one day. That can't hurt, can it?"

It wouldn’t. I’d been working at a garage full time for the past two years. It wasn’t great money, but it was better than what I’d had before. I could manage a long weekend—if I could convince Madison to take Creed. That was the tricky part. She hated having Creed on the weekends. It *“interfered with her life.”*

My answer was to steal another kiss, and I fumbled to place my beer on the railing so I could pull Cam in closer and devour him more thoroughly. He lost his beer too and our connection deepened, tongues lacing and gliding together, bodies pressed as close as they could get.

Cam was an amazing lover, and we often struggled to contain our affections. Everything was still fairly new between us, and we were at that stage where it was hard to *not* be affectionate. It was hard *not* touching and *not* leaning in to grab that small peck on the lips when we were close to one another. Or grabbing that perfect bubbled ass of his when he walked by.

So with the understanding that our kids were plenty occupied, it was impossible to pull back or curb our building appetite. Cam’s hands fumbled up my shirt while mine explored the smooth skin under his along the base of his spine, lowering to grab two handfuls of his ass. Before long, the fire between us burned with such intensity we were grinding together and moaning into each other’s mouths.

Stealing a quick glance at the sliding door, determining we were safe, I unbuckled Cam’s pants and dipped a hand below the band of his boxers, grasping his steely length.

“Fuck, yeah.” Cam moaned and thrust into my hand, unashamed.

“Shh. Keep it down. Just in case.”

He dropped his head onto my shoulder and allowed me the control, his hips jerking forward more than once when he couldn’t help it. I firmed my grip, tugging him the way I knew he liked it as I threaded fingers through his hair and kissed his neck, sucking just enough so I wouldn’t leave a visible mark but enough to make him whimper.

Cam’s fingers dug into my sides, and he vibrated the closer he got to release. Our mouths crashed together again, and the kiss turned frantic and sloppy, uncoordinated. I knew Cam was close. As he panted and lapped at my tongue, he fumbled with the button on my pants.

Just as a draft of cool air hit my throbbing erection, just as Cam sucked my tongue and groaned, shuddering and spilling into my hand, we heard a giggle behind us.

I'd never moved faster in my life, nor had I ever been so horrified. Cam's face mirrored my own panic in that split second it took us to react. I shoved him away, sending him stumbling over his pants which had fallen over his ass and moved halfway down his legs. Frantically, I secured the button on my jeans as I whipped my head toward the door and caught two sets of young eyes watching us.

The minute they knew they were caught, they squealed and ran.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Cam was back on his feet, pants in place, and we shared a look of uncertainty and horror.

"How do you want to handle this, Rhy?"

Shock made me unable to find words. I stared and blinked and winced when I realized I had to have some kind of talk with Creed about what he'd seen. There was no way he understood sex at his age. Would he? I couldn't ask him to lie for me. Did I tell him the truth? I'd have to come out before Madison learned from Creed. What would she say? What would everyone say?

"Rhy?"

"I-I don't know what to do. Shit. This was so stupid."

Cam reached for me, but I brushed away his advances. I didn't miss the hurt that crossed his face. "Look, why don't I take Arik home tonight. I need to talk to him too, and it might not be the same conversation you want to have with your son."

"Are you telling him you're gay?"

"There is no reason why I shouldn't. My family knows. His mother knows. I'm not hiding it from him."

I dropped my chin and laced my fingers behind my head. An intense headache formed behind my eyes, and I squeezed them closed, wishing I knew how everything would turn out if I was just honest.

Cam squeezed my shoulder. "Call me, okay?"

"Yeah."

I heard him enter the house and talk quietly to the boys. Then a few minutes later, the front door clicked, and I knew I had to move. Creed was alone and probably confused, maybe upset because his friend left when he was supposed to spend the night.

I entered the house. It was quiet. I found Creed in the living room on the couch, face drawn and shoulders slumped as he picked at a hole in the

toe of his sock. The TV was on, but he wasn't watching it.

"Hey, buddy. Can we talk?"

He shook his head, his brows drawing in, his lower lip jutting out.

Ignoring his answer, I dropped on the couch beside him and wrapped an arm around his shoulder, drawing him against my side.

"Why did Arik have to go home?"

"Because his dad needed to talk to him, and I need to talk to you."

"I don't care if you kiss Cam. He can be your boyfriend. I just want to have Arik here so we can play our game again."

"Creed, this is important."

"No!" He jumped off the couch and swung an arm, clearing the coffee table of all the snacks they had piled up on the surface. "I just… He's my friend… don't like…" He squeezed his fists tight as he scanned the room, and I knew between the body language and broken thoughts Creed was escalating fast.

Used to Creed's extreme tantrums—even at nine—I realized this conversation would go nowhere with his mood.

He shrieked and started looking for anything and everything he could smash or break. Low frustration level, hot temper, and frequent mood swings. All things the doctor had explained were part of Creed's ADHD and all things he suffered with daily. When his control slipped, the environment overwhelmed him. When that happened, the explosions that followed weren't something he could control. It hurt to watch, especially when there was little I could do for him.

He was swiftly moving into destructive mode. Breaking up his sleepover for reasons he couldn't understand had triggered it.

"Bedroom. Now." I used the stern voice that mostly worked, slipping in all the authority and anger I could into my voice so he'd do as I said. "You are not trashing this living room. Go."

It worked, only in the sense that it saved *my* possessions. Once in his room, Creed lost it. He raged, tearing sheets off his bed, ripping posters off his walls, breaking anything that could or would break, throwing books, toys, lamps, knocking his dresser over, and hitting the wall over and over again with his fists. The curtains over his window ended up on the ground, and he made every attempt possible to pull his own hair out—the reason it had been buzzed for the past few years.

When he got like this, the only thing to do was ride the storm.

He sputtered incoherent rants, broken sentences that he couldn't articulate to save his life. Single words, sometimes two or three strung together, but never many more.

"I was… Hate you… Can't I ever… Why… Just want… No… Gonna… Break everything…" His little chest heaved, and tears wet his cheeks in rivers.

Only when his tantrum simmered and his exhaustion settled in did I enter the room. The doctor had explained the necessity for outlets, and although I didn't condone Creed destroying his room, it was *his* room, and the consequence was *his* things were broken as a result. There were all kinds of other tools, but the moment had slipped downhill too fast. I'd missed the opportunity to suggest punching playdough or the blow-up bat he liked to beat against the balcony railing.

Creed sat among the destruction, crying and red in the face, clothing in disarray, trembling, and with snot running down to his lip. I squatted in front of him and drew him into my arms. He went willingly. I sat on the floor and held him, knowing the conversation I needed to have would be on hold. He wasn't in any state of mind to discuss things that didn't concern him. Creed didn't care about my relationship with Cam, his only concern was his lost sleepover with his friend.

"Are you calmer, or do you need a pill?"

"Still… It's all mixed… up," he blubbered, making more sense than earlier but only barely.

The doctor had prescribed a low-dose anxiety medication, similar to Xanax but more suitable for children, that could be given during Creed's extreme episodes. We used it sparingly, if at all, but I'd learned to trust Creed's intuition for when he required it. He knew and understood his head sometimes better than I did. He couldn't always articulate or control his episodes, but he could determine if he needed help calming down.

"So a pill then?"

He nodded and sniffled, wiping his nose on my shoulder.

"Come on. Let's go get one and then we'll clean up your bed and snuggle for a bit. Sound good?"

"Yeah. Okay."

Four days later, everything changed.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Four
Rhyker

OceanofPDF.com

September 2009

I KNOCKED AGAIN, scanning the streets as I waited for someone to answer the door. It was Wednesday afternoon, and I was supposed to be picking Creed up for the night, but there was no answer at Madison's house. It was quiet, but Marge's car was in the driveway, so I assumed she was home with Creed. She was the one who ordinarily picked him up after school.

Another firm knock without results, and I pulled my phone from my pocket, intent on texting Madison to see what was up. The door swung open before I could type a single word, and Eugene, Madison's dad, stood beyond the threshold looking less welcoming than usual.

"Hey, just here to pick—"

"I'm going to ask you to leave."

"Excuse me?"

"Leave. You won't be taking Creed anywhere."

I flinched, mind racing with the implication of his words. "What are you talking about? He's my son. It's Wednesday and my night with him."

"There will be no more visitations. We've already contacted our lawyer. If you want to cause problems, I'll get the police involved too."

"What? What are you talking about?" Cold fear flooded my veins, and my heart stuttered and skipped faster.

"I'm talking about the disgusting vileness to which you subjected my grandchild."

Vileness? What the hell was he—

Cam. Fuck.

"I didn't subject him to anything. He accidentally—"

"Enough. Leave my premises, or I'm calling the police."

"No. I'm here for Creed. Get Madison."

The door slammed in my face, and my knees nearly gave out. *What the hell?* I pounded again, fury burning in my core.

"*I'll* call the fucking police," I yelled. "You have no right. Let me see my son."

Eugene refused to answer, and the more I slammed my fist on the door, the more adrenaline pumped through my body, and the angrier I became. I

ripped a hand through my hair and growled as I spun in place, unsure what to do.

Tearing my phone from my pocket, I pulled up Madison's number and connected the call. It rang and rang and rang, but finally, she picked up.

"Rhyker—"

I wouldn't let her get out more than my name. "What the hell is going on? You can't keep Creed from me. Are you insane?"

"Are *you* insane? You're freaking gay? For real? And you're fucking men in front of our son?"

"What? Have you lost your mind? I would never do anything like that in front of Creed. What he saw was an accident. He was supposed to be watching TV with his friend. We were behind closed doors, and we weren't fucking. Jesus, woman."

"Oh my God, you really are gay. You aren't even denying it. I should have known."

"Madison. This is ridiculous. Open the door."

"Ridiculous? For nine years you've exposed *my* son to your… your lifestyle. Nine years, Rhyker. That's abuse!"

"What?! What the fuck are you talking about? He's never known a single thing about my relationships until last weekend. Even then, what he saw was minimal and an accident. It could have happened to anybody. Christ, he knows more about your sexual prowess than he does mine."

"Living with a gay man is abuse enough, Rhyker. Do you know what that will do to his young mind? He's going to grow up thinking that stuff is okay, and it's not. No wonder he's a fucking little bratty monster half the time. You've messed with his brain already. You're the reason he's a whiny little asshole."

I gaped, unable to form words or an argument in the face of such lunacy. Such cruelty. Was she serious? Did she believe the shit spilling from her mouth?

And how dare she call Creed a monster. An asshole.

"Madison, you can't keep me from my son."

"Um… Yes, I can. And Daddy has a lawyer now who will make sure you never have him again. Don't call me, Rhyker. The lawyer will contact you."

She hung up, and I stood on the sidewalk, dumbfounded, shocked, my head racing and body shaking. This wasn't real. I was dreaming.

I stared at the house and the drawn curtains over the windows. My blood ran cold as I tried to figure out what to do.

I got into my car, but before I drove away, I called the local police department myself. They couldn't keep me from my kid. This was wrong on so many levels. He was my goddamn son.

I stuck around when they told me they were sending an officer to the house. When the squad car pulled up to the curb behind me, I got out and met the uniformed man on the sidewalk.

"Rhyker Collins?"

"That's me."

"Officer Weber." We shook, and he studied me with hard eyes of near liquid black. "What seems to be the issue?"

I tipped my head toward the house. "I came to pick up my son because it's my night with him, and his mother and her parents won't let me see him."

"Do you have a custody arrangement they're blatantly disregarding?"

I squeezed my eyes closed and blew out a breath. "No. We've just had a verbal arrangement since he was born. Nothing through the courts. It was never required before."

The officer made a noise as he shuffled around to examine the house. "And what's the reason for this sudden disagreement over custody?"

I shoved my hands in my pockets and shook my head in disbelief. "They found out I'm gay and feel my lifestyle will be damaging to my son."

Officer Weber's penetrating gaze turned on me. He scanned my person before making a decision and walking to the front door. I didn't know if I should follow or hang back, but the urgency to get Creed outweighed everything, so I lingered a few feet behind when he knocked.

It took twice and him announcing who he was for Eugene to answer. He didn't look any more amicable with the officer than he'd been with me.

Before I could get a word out or have a say, Officer Weber asked to be admitted into the house for a chat, and the door closed in my face. I was left alone on the front step, anxiety wreaking havoc on my body.

He was in there a long time. Long enough for panic to set in and millions of scenarios to play out in my head. I debated texting Cam but figured I should wait until I knew more. There was no sense getting him worked up too when I had no clue how this would end.

Finally, nearly half an hour later, Officer Weber emerged from the house. The front door closed behind him, and there was a finality about it that shivered over my skin.

He approached and tucked a notepad into a slot on his belt before scanning me. “So there isn’t a whole lot I can do for you without a legal custody arrangement. We discussed the issue, and there seem to be multiple concerns. They are steadfast in their decision to not allow the child to leave, and I can’t force them. I suggest contacting a lawyer and getting something put in place as quickly as possible.”

“So you’re saying I can’t see my son?”

“I’m saying, I’m not in a position to force the matter without legal documentation stating your claim to the child.”

“This is bullshit.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Collins. It would be best if you didn’t create a scene. That would only make matters worse for you.”

I felt hot and cold all at the same time. This was all surreal. I’d been part of Creed’s life since before he was born. I’d done all I could to be the best father I could be. Now I was being denied access? For what? Because I was gay? Because they thought I’d subjected him to some sort of indecency?

I thought I was going to throw up.

Officer Weber gave my shoulder a squeeze and offered me his card. In my muddled brain, I heard him talking but couldn’t process his words.

Then, he was gone.

I got in my car and sat there, unable to focus, unable to move. Directionless. Lost. Empty.

Creed was less than fifty feet away, and I couldn’t get him. I couldn’t talk to him or explain why I wasn’t there to take him home with me. Did he understand what was going on? What bullshit lies were they filling his head with?

I called Cam but got his voicemail.

I called my parents but hung up before they answered, knowing they wouldn’t care.

Tears welled, blurring my vision, and I knew I had to find a lawyer and soon.

Except, lawyers were expensive, and my extra money was minimal. Legal Aid was a thing, but I knew little about it and didn’t know if I’d

qualify.

Eventually, I drove home and spent the rest of the evening on the internet looking up all I could about custody and the process I needed to go through to get my son. The entire time, my chest felt hollow.

My mind wandered to Creed more than once. Was he confused? Did he know why Daddy never came to get him? Had they brainwashed him into believing I was somehow evil and dirty?

This might set him off. Would they handle his outburst properly? Give him meds if he needed them?

My heart ached for my son. He was only nine. Why were they doing this to him?

SIX MONTHS AND EIGHTEEN days later, my life came to a screeching halt. All hope dissolved in the hands of one homophobic judge who deemed my actions to be neglectful and borderline abusive.

“Full custody of the child, Creed Kelly-Collins, will remain with the mother, Madison Kelly. Supervised visitations will be granted only after the father, Rhyker Collins, has attended a minimum of thirty hours of mandated parenting courses.”

The gavel came down, ending the session abruptly. My whole body echoed and reverberated the finality of his judgment. It was outrageous. Unbelievable.

My legs wanted to give out, and I didn’t know what to do.

“We can appeal,” my lawyer, David Hillsborough, said, leaning against my side and talking low. “It will take time, but I strongly suggest it.”

“Do it. How is it even a question? Fuck.”

“In the meantime, go to those classes.”

“I’d love to know how I’m fitting that into my schedule since they are day classes and I work twelve hours a day just so I can afford you and this fucking process that never should have happened.”

“Look, I’m just advising you. Make it happen, or you won’t see your son. I guarantee it. An appeal in no way guarantees a new judge. So, in case that happens, you toe the line and do what they want.”

I tore a hand through my hair, snarling my anger, then spun and barreled out the doors of the courtroom. My head pounded, and nausea turned my stomach, rotting and burning my gut.

I hadn’t seen my child in six months already. Six fucking months. How could they do this to me? To Creed?

In six months, I’d lost everything I cared about. My relationship with Cam had ended because I was angry all the time. My parents shrugged and told me I should have thought twice about my actions and kept my dick in my pants in the first place. And Creed was out of reach.

It was all bullshit.

Except, I knew… I fucking *knew* if I’d been accidentally caught making out with a woman in front of Creed this would all be different. None of this would have happened. This had everything to do with my being gay and the small-town mentality over homosexuality.

THREE MONTHS LATER, I lost the appeal. Two months after that, my boss warned me I would lose my job if I kept requesting time off for those stupid classes I was mandated to attend and didn’t need. They were only offered once a week and in two-hour sessions. I was lucky if I could break away from work and attend two a month. It was taking forever to put in my allotted hours.

I was in hell. Alone. And aching from missing my son.

Late at night, I lay awake, restless, wondering what Creed thought of all this. Did he miss me? Did he think of me or want to be with me? Or had they ruined all I’d built with lies and their homophobic attitude?

It’d been almost a year. A whole year without him.

It was unfathomable.

At fifteen, when I’d found out I was going to be a father, I’d wanted nothing to do with him. Now, the thought of him not being in my life crushed my soul.

It was a cool October morning when I finished my last ridiculous parenting session at the Adult Learning Center. I raced to my lawyer’s without bothering to head to work. I needed to set up a visitation *immediately*. It was my sole focus. The only thing I cared about. Except, I didn’t know what to do to make that happen.

If my boss wanted to fire me, I’d deal with it then. Creed came first. He was my single-minded focus.

Since supervised visitations were arranged through some legal route, my lawyer gave me the directions I needed to follow to make them happen.

At the courthouse, I filed the necessary paperwork and was told I'd be contacted soon with a time and location.

Supervised visitations. It was insulting, but I would grit my teeth and get over it. It was something. Better than nothing. It was time with Creed.

Days passed with no word.

When I called to inquire, I was told, *"We're looking into it."*

I didn't know what that meant or why the holdup, but I tried to be patient.

When two weeks went by with no word, I called my lawyer again, knowing every meeting, every phone call we had together put me more and more in debt. But I didn't know what else to do.

"Hold, please."

I listened to the grating elevator music on the other line while I waited for David to pick up the phone.

"Mr. Collins?"

"Yes, I'm here. What's going on? Why are they not telling me anything?"

"It seems there has been an issue getting ahold of Madison, or any of the Kelly family."

"What does that mean? She's not picking up her phone?" That would be typical.

A long pause stretched between us, followed by the shuffling of papers before David spoke again. "No. It seems to be more complicated than that. Madison and her parents have fallen off the map."

"What?" The single word was barely a whisper. Icy water spilled down my spine, making me sit straighter, stiffer. "Off the map? That's not possible. What do you mean?"

I knew exactly what it meant, but my head refused to accept reality.

"It means they've left the city. Based on the notes I have, possibly the province altogether. They aren't sure yet. They're looking."

"But… Creed. They can't do that."

"Let me look into what all is being done, Mr. Collins. If they've left the province, I'm not sure what all we can do. It will be outside our jurisdiction."

"That's kidnapping!" I roared. "She took my son."

"Rhyker, take a breath. It's not kidnapping when she has full custody. Let me see what I can do. I'll call when I know anything."

Trembling, I hung up the phone and stared at the wall. How could an already fucked-up situation be any worse? How could they do this to me?

Oh God. Creed. Where are you?

Overwhelmed by defeat, I stumbled into the kitchen and cracked a beer before downing it in a few short swigs. I grabbed another and leaned against the counter, doing all I could to hold back the flood of emotions wanting to drag me down. All the hard work I'd put in just so I could see my son again only to find out they'd taken him and split. All the blood, sweat, and tears that went into raising him despite having so many factors working against me—primarily his diagnoses and my age. All for what? For them to run off? How long had they been gone? Where did they go?

And I'm the bad parent?

I couldn't take it anymore.

I broke down. Cried. Drank. Sat on my kitchen floor and cried some more.

In one year, my entire life had been turned upside down.

ON CREED'S ELEVENTH birthday, I gave up with the legal system and their shitty-ass efforts to find my son and hired a private investigator. He was the cheapest I could find in a sea of painfully high prices. All the extra money that used to go toward Creed's care and my lawyer, I put into finding my son instead. It wasn't much, but it was the best I could do.

"Do you have any reason to suspect Madison isn't with her parents anymore?"

I spun my paper coffee cup on the laminate tabletop and stared into space. The coffee house noises were muffled by the thick fog I carried everywhere I went. "No. She could barely take care of herself, let alone Creed on her own. She didn't do well with responsibility. She relied on her parents too much. All the time."

"Okay." Tony Freedman took notes. "Jobs. What did her parents do for a living? What did Madison do?"

I scratched the scruff of the beard I'd been growing as I shook my head. "Madison never had more than minimum wage jobs. She was always quitting. She was so scattered and directionless. She lived off her parents and was more worried about her social life than working full time and finishing a college degree. Her dad was a Realtor, but he retired four years

ago. Her mom had some office secretary job. She'd been talking about retiring too."

"Realtor?"

I knew that only made their disappearing act easier. Eugene would have had firsthand knowledge of properties all over the place. Maybe connections in other provinces, too. Was that where they'd gone?

"Okay. So these pictures here are the most recent you have?"

I eyed the photos I'd dug up for the investigation. The picture of Creed stung the back of my eyes. It had been taken on his ninth birthday. He was smiling across the table with a huge frosted cake in front of him, lit up with nine glowing candles. The candlelight flickered across his cheeks and twinkled in his eyes.

"Yeah. That's the most recent I've got. It was taken one of the last times I had him at my house."

"Is there anything distinguishing in their personalities or medical history that could help point me in a direction? Tattoos, scars, anything like that can help."

"Um… Creed has ADHD and SPD. He takes Adderall. He has a history of problems in school. Learning disabilities. Got in trouble a lot. Physically, he has a birthmark on his upper leg, here." I rubbed my hip in a large circle to explain.

Tony made more notes. "And Madison or her parents?"

"I think Eugene took blood pressure medication."

The questions went on and on. Did Madison like getting her hair or nails done regularly? Where did they shop frequently? What type of alcohol did they drink? Did they vacation? If so, where? Did they read? Gamble? Who were their friends? Acquaintances? Enemies? Colleagues? What kind of savings might they have had?

Most of it seemed irrelevant, but I answered all he asked to the best of my ability. He was my last hope. My last connection to finding Creed.

When Tony finished the interview, we shook, and he stood from the table. The coffee house crowd had dwindled in the time we'd been talking. He scanned the other tables before returning his attention to me.

"I'll be in touch. Hopefully with some news. I can't make promises. The farther outside the area they've gone, the less likely I am to find anything. We have no proof they stayed in the province or even the country, for that matter. They could easily have gone anywhere. I'll do my best."

That was all I could hope for.

Unfortunately, his best wasn't good enough.

The investigation dragged on for months with no news and no new information. My funds dwindled, and I didn't know how much longer I could afford to keep this up.

On Creed's twelfth birthday, three years from the last time I'd seen him, I made the gut-wrenching decision to stop looking.

I was destroyed.

Drained.

Defeated.

Wherever Madison had gone with Creed, it was clear I wasn't meant to find them. For all I knew, they'd left the country, crossed the ocean, or changed their names.

This search had consumed me, eaten at my core, and destroyed every aspect of my life for the past three years. It was tearing me apart from the inside out. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, I'd changed jobs four times, and I had no desire to date or carry on a relationship.

I was twenty-eight and digging myself an early grave.

Something had to give.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Five
Creed

OceanofPDF.com

October 2016

A BRISK KNOCK on my bedroom door made me jump and yank my earbuds out in a panic. I tossed the blanket from my bed over my lap and slammed my laptop so hard I cringed, hoping I hadn't broken it again.

"What?" I barked, heart slamming, eyes bulging.

Heat rose to my cheeks, and I panted, praying silently that whoever was pounding didn't want in. I looked guilty as hell and knew it.

"Are you studying?"

Gay porn? Yes. Algebra? Not a chance.

Grandpa's tone was firm and clipped, as usual. It instantly put my nose out of joint and stiffened my back—despite the raging erection that was not deflating as quickly as I'd have liked.

"Yes. Leave me alone."

"Your teacher called again. She said you skipped class today."

"So? She's a fucking bitch who never leaves me alone. I didn't want to go. Who cares?"

"Language, CJ," Grandpa growled. "Do you want to be grounded again?"

"Do you want to eat shit and die?" I mumbled under my breath so he wouldn't hear me. "Whatever. I'm studying. Leave me alone."

It took a minute, but when I heard him move away from the door, I breathed a sigh of relief and cautiously lifted the lid of my laptop, typing in my password before pausing the video I'd been watching.

The still frame of two guys fucking stared back at me as I considered whether I should keep going or wait until everyone went to bed so I could guarantee no more interruptions. My erection had flagged somewhat, and my nerves were on edge, so I shut down the video and put my laptop aside.

Lying back on my bed, I palmed myself a few times before tugging up my pants and underwear and blowing out a long, frustrated breath.

The TV in the living room blared and grated my brain, and I knew Grandma was watching her shows. I should study, but I knew my head was racing too much to make that happen. It was why I'd decided to jerk off in the first place. To help calm the electrical storm ravaging my brain.

Nothing worked better than a few good orgasms.

It didn’t always calm the scattered thoughts and jitters, but it did sedate my body so I felt less unsettled. If only I could manage the real thing. Find a guy at school willing to fuck around and try some of this shit I watched on my porn sites.

Now that would be something.

Except, I’d been raised hearing Grandma and Grandpa preach about how homosexuality was sinful and disgusting. Mom went on tangents too, like they were trying to drill something into my head. Like they somehow knew or saw my inner thoughts when I’d been so careful to keep them all hidden.

It drove me crazy. It also made me terrified to experiment on the off chance I got caught. Besides, I didn’t know of any other guys at my school who were gay. We were probably all a bunch of closeted freaks watching porn in our bedrooms behind locked doors and jerking off alone.

What the fuck ever.

I sighed and fought the twinges and restlessness in my body, making me need to fidget and move. The overhead lights stung my eyes, so I pulled my pillow over my face, trying to shut out the world—and the fucking noise from down the hall.

With a fist, I started pounding rhythmically on the wall beside my bed, a steady *thump, thump, thump* just to take the edge off. Drive the energy out of my body. Align my thoughts. I squeezed my eyes closed and thumped harder, focusing on the way the vibrations moved up my arm and pulsed through my chest. It was grounding, in a way. I didn’t know why, but it helped.

Thump, thump, thump…

Harder.

Louder.

Controlled.

I kicked my leg out to the same rhythm, slamming it against the footboard of my bed.

The scrambling. The agitation. It eased a fraction. Not a lot, but enough I felt it.

“Creed Jackson Kelly! Stop that incessant banging on the walls,” Grandpa yelled from the front of the house.

Wow. My *full* name. That didn’t happen often. He was pissed.

I growled and slammed my fist into the wall once more for good measure, as hard as I could, before trying to remain still again. But the instant I stopped, bugs crawled through my veins. Itching. Tickling. Worming around.

The longer I lay, the worse it got. The TV was shrill. The lights blinding. Something was cooking, and the scent surrounding me was intense enough I gagged.

Eventually, I rolled off the bed, stuffed my phone in my pocket, and jetted out the door and down the hall to the front of the house. Fuck if I could stay in one place right now. I had to do something. Go somewhere.

Move. Move. Move.

“I’m going out,” I mumbled as I pulled on my shoes and tugged the hood on my hoodie up over my head, hiding behind the shadow it drew across my face. My sun-bleached blond hair drooped into my face, but I didn’t care and left it there like a curtain, blocking out the world. It was long enough in the front it hit my chin now. Long enough it pissed Grandpa and Mom off. Fuck ’em. I liked it.

Before I escaped, thundering footfalls barreled into the front hall. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I said, I’m going out.”

“No, you aren’t. You are failing half your classes, and you have midterm exams coming up. Get back in your room and study. We just had this conversation, young man.” Grandpa’s voice boomed louder than the TV. With his hands on his hips and his chest puffed out, I thought he was going for dominating and threatening.

Whatever. It didn’t work on me.

I didn’t give a fuck.

“I can’t study. My head is mixed up. I need a break.”

“That’s not an excuse, CJ. I’m not going to tell you again. If you don’t get in your room—”

“You’ll what? Make me? Really? How exactly? You gonna drag me down the hall? I dare ya.”

He pursed his lips, face reddening as he glowered. “I’m not impressed with this behavior.”

“Yeah. I’m not impressed with this lecture. Fuck you. I’m out. I’m going to Mom’s.”

“CJ Kelly!”

Ignoring him, I flew out the front door, slamming it behind me with a satisfying bang, and hunched against the cold as I aimed toward town. It was a five-kilometer walk, and the fall temperatures were dipping toward freezing. All I had on was my hoodie over my T-shirt, and it was barely enough to keep me warm.

“Fucking miserable-ass dick,” I muttered to myself all the way to town, kicking at the loose gravel of the dirt road as I went.

The wind whipped through the empty fields and across the desolate highway. Not a single car was in sight, or I’d have tried to thumb a ride.

I had no intention of visiting my mother. She was just as fucking irritating most days as my grandparents, and we set each other off more times than not over stupid bullshit. Besides, she was probably busy with the new boyfriend and would get pissed if I showed up without calling. I knew where I ranked in her life.

Saint John, New Brunswick was a decent-sized city with plenty enough to keep me busy even in shitty weather. I hated living in the rural county and wished we could move closer to town. When I’d expressed my thoughts once a few years back, Grandpa told me I was unappreciative of country living. I called him a wanker and got grounded for a week.

Mom lived in town, but we didn’t mesh well enough to live together anymore. We’d tried numerous times, but eventually, she always sent me back to live with my grandparents.

As I walked, distant memories of my life back in Ontario came to mind. They were broken and disjointed, mostly. Like the images of a dream you couldn’t quite remember. I was young when we’d left and could only summon up vague impressions of the city where we’d lived. It was called Peterborough.

I remembered snippets of activities I used to do there. Fishing. Skating. Swimming. Flying a kite once and getting it stuck in a tree. Collecting worms from puddles. Christmas parades and fireworks on Canada Day weekend.

In all those memories was my dad.

I couldn’t really remember what he looked like, and when I’d asked Mom and Grandma once if they had a picture of him, they’d told me no. Grandpa said he was a bad man and I shouldn’t waste thought on him.

None of my memories supported that.

I didn’t know why he wasn’t in my life anymore or if he was even alive. All I knew was his name was Rhyker Collins, but that was because my birth certificate told me so. I’d gone through Grandpa’s desk in his office once when he wasn’t home and found it.

I’d Googled Dad’s name, but it was impossible to tell if any of the hits I’d found were him. He was a murky shadow in my mind. A faceless mystery man I couldn’t quite see. A niggling curiosity that poked at my brain late at night when I couldn’t sleep.

What I *could* remember clearly was his laughter. Him chasing me around a park once and tickling me until I almost barfed. I remembered popcorn at the movies. Swimming in the community pool in the summer. PlayStation, and Ferris wheels at the annual fall fair. I remembered his security and warm hugs after I melted down. His snuggles and the way he stroked fingers over my head to calm me.

Lightness. Excitement. Comfort.

I hated how much I could remember without really being able to see his face. They were more emotional memories. Feelings I’d retained over the years. All of them warm and happy.

But he was gone, and the people in my life refused to talk about him.

By the time I reached the city’s edge, night had fallen. The streetlights winked on, and the traffic was steady as people traveled home from work. When I checked my phone, I realized it was almost six thirty at night. I cut down an alley to get to the closest bus stop and dug through my pockets for enough change to hopefully pay the fare and get myself downtown.

There was an arcade where a few guys I knew hung out. Also, a pool hall slash sports bar that didn’t care if underaged kids came in for a random game on the coin-operated tables. It was the go-to spot when I skipped school.

In the alley behind the bar, I could usually bum a smoke or talk someone into buying me alcohol. Right now, with my head knotted and skin buzzing with excess adrenaline, I needed the escape.

Something.

Anything.

The bus showed up ten minutes later. I slotted enough change into the machine and found a spot at the back to sit. The city flew by in a smear of washed-out monochrome. Lights glowed brightly from storefront windows, and the headlights from passing cars made me squint.

I fisted a hand and banged it repeatedly against the side of the bus, much like I'd done on the wall at home. At least no one here gave a damn. It rewarded me with a gratifying, metallic resonation that reverberated over my skin. My leg jiggled too as thoughts raced around my head in the usual disorderly fashion. I couldn't focus on one thing for more than a passing minute. Tonight, it was a jumble of past conversations, worries, or fleeting things about my day.

My teachers bitching about my failing grades, telling me I was causing a scene or being disruptive. My grandpa barking about my exams. Mom whining to Grandma about whatever new drama was afflicting her life at the time. And those tangled, nondescript memories of my father.

They all fell over each other. Fighting for dominance. Too tangled and knotted to make sense yet enough to agitate me nonetheless.

When I arrived downtown, I aimed for the arcade, veering down a side street that would take me to the rear of the building. In a shadowed nook, I noticed a group of men gathered, smoking and chatting by the back entrance. They looked to be about nineteen or twenty years old.

I approached and tipped my chin in greeting. "Can I bum a smoke?"

I earned a few glares, and a guy in a tattered jean jacket narrowed his eyes while he puffed on his cigarette. "I'll *trade* you a smoke. I won't *give* you one."

"For what?"

"Whatcha offering?"

"Nothing. I don't have anything."

"Pretty little thing like you has plenty to offer. Those lips alone are priceless."

I drew my lips into my mouth and fisted my hands as electricity snapped and popped over my skin. I hated being called pretty. More than enough people in my life had felt the need to point out I had girly lips and eyes. My mother most of all.

Fire simmered to life in my core, and I scowled at the group who were all chuckling at jean-jacket man's comment.

"Fuck you. I'm not pretty, you ass. I'm just asking for a fucking smoke."

He squinted and drew on his cigarette until the ember glowed, then he blew the smoke in my face, making me cough and turn my head. "Piss off, kid. I ain't giving you a handout."

I vibrated. My anger grew like a tangible thing, threatening to overwhelm me. Simmering, seething, I backed away, ready to retreat before I snapped.

“Wait, wait,” Jean-jacket’s friend said, patting his buddy’s chest as he smirked in my direction. “The kid sounds pretty desperate. Maybe he doesn’t understand there are ways he could earn his smoke.” Then the guy grabbed himself provocatively and wiggled his brows. “What do you say, kid? How badly do you want that smoke?”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh yeah? Come here and say it to my face, you little punk.”

My head was a clutter of noise and chaos. It was quickly slipping beyond my control. I felt it. I knew where I’d end up if I didn’t leave.

I gave them the finger and ducked my head, aiming for the rear doors of the arcade, squeezing my fists into tight balls so I wouldn’t reactively lash out—despite wanting to drive my fist into the asshole’s smug face.

Inside, the game machines plinked and chimed and sang with people’s wins. It was too much tonight. Grating, like nails on a chalkboard. The hairs on my arms stood on end, and I ground my teeth as I scanned the dark room. At the far end, I spotted a guy I knew from school. We sometimes hung out. Mostly when we skipped class.

Jeremy Blundy.

He was a year older than me and notorious for knowing all the perfect places to get what we needed for a relaxing night. Smokes, alcohol, and for him, girls who were interested in sucking dick in the alleys. I’d never told him it wasn’t my thing, but I’d been around when he’d picked up chicks and disappeared for twenty minutes outside. I was curious, but not curious enough to let a girl near me like that. The thought gave me shivers.

Weaving through the throng of bodies with my shoulders near my ears and my eyes squinted against the overwhelming noise, I crossed to Jeremy. I punched his arm to grab his attention.

“Yo. ’Sup?”

“Hey.” Jeremy’s face split into a mischievous grin when he turned around. “I thought you’d be fucking grounded after the shit you pulled in Mrs. Muller’s class.”

I laughed. “Yeah, right. They can fucking try grounding me. Won’t hold and they know it. What’s going on tonight?”

“Not much.”

“I need to get fucked up. Anything, man. Seriously. I don’t want to go home, and I need to calm my head. Can you hook me up?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Don’t know. I’m broke. Can you front me? I’ll pay you back.”

Jeremy frowned.

“You know I’m good for it.”

Jeremy scanned the room as he thought. Then he smacked me on the shoulder and tipped his chin to the back door. “Come on. I think I’ve got the perfect plan. But you fucking owe me.”

I followed Jeremy out the back door, grateful for the relief from the noise, and flicked my gaze to where the group of guys had been earlier. They were gone, but remembering the brief conversation stirred my blood again.

Jeremy headed down a side street, and I followed silently. Before long, we got to a run-down building—a three-story, walk-up apartment complex. We entered the front doors, and he buzzed one of the apartments, peeking at me with smugness like whatever we were doing was gonna be great. I hoped so.

A gruff voice barked over the intercom a minute later.

“What?”

“It’s J.”

“You alone?”

“Nah, got a friend with me. CJ.”

“I don’t know him.”

“He’s cool. I can vouch for him. Come on, man, seriously. I’ve got cash. You want business or not?”

“Fucking shut up on the com, asshole.”

There was a pause then the buzzer sounded, letting us know he’d granted us access to the building.

Jeremy wasted no time and went directly to the third floor, taking the stairs two at a time. He paused outside the man’s apartment on the far end of the hallway and hitched a brow as he studied me.

“Be cool. I’m serious. Calm your tits in there and don’t make a fucking scene.”

I gave him a what-the-fuck look and shoved his shoulder. But his concern was warranted. I had a reputation. In school and on the street. I was

a loose cannon. Hot-headed. An easy person to fire up, and when that happened, I was reckless.

The man who answered when Jeremy knocked was older—probably mid-twenties and had long dark hair, thin and scraggly. He wore loose-fitting jeans in severe disrepair and no shirt, exposing his rail-thin frame and random, piecemeal tattoos. His eyes were bloodshot, and his skin pallid.

He studied me for a half a beat, and I held his gaze, not flinching or caring one way or the other what he thought of me. The guy was clearly strung out.

After a beat, he pushed the door open, letting us inside. The apartment was a shitstorm of empty liquor bottles, pieced together furniture, and trash. There were bags of marijuana on his coffee table, rolled joints, multiple packs of smokes, and overfilled ashtrays. It stank of musty, stale air. Lingering clouds of pot and cigarette smoke gave the room a hazy quality, burning my eyes after being in the crisp night. The scent hit me hard. It was all around us, smothering and suffocating. I wrinkled my nose and did my best to ignore it.

Jeremy walked in like he'd been there a hundred times before, so I set my features and followed. "Teddy, this is CJ. CJ, Teddy."

"What do you need?" Teddy asked, not looking interested in chitchat and cutting to the chase.

"Whatever twenty bucks will get us."

"Twenty fucking bucks? I let you in for twenty bucks? You serious right now?"

"Man, it's all I've got. Don't fucking patronize me."

Teddy moved his stone-cold stare between us before shaking his head in disgust and barely restraining an eye roll. He walked to the coffee table and tossed Jeremy a half-empty pack of smokes then jiggled a bottle of some amber liquor whose label was no longer readable. It was three-quarters full. He tossed him that too.

"There's twenty fucking bucks' worth, kid. Deal with it."

"How much for a joint?" I asked, curious since I'd never done shit like that before and felt compelled to try something new, especially with the way my head was tonight.

Teddy eyed me as he scratched at the scraggly scruff on his chin. "You ain't got enough."

“I said, how much?”

“And I said, you ain’t got enough.”

“Never mind.” Jeremy tugged my arm, encouraging me to leave. He tossed a twenty-dollar bill at Teddy and aimed for the door.

But I wasn’t having it. I planted my feet and glared at the strung-out dick who thought he was tough shit. “What’s your fucking problem? How do you know what kind of money I have? Do you just not wanna sell it to me?”

“Fuck off, kid.”

“No. Fuck you.”

“CJ. Enough. Let’s go.”

The cumulating anger from earlier hadn’t dissipated. The sensory assault I’d been trying to shed all night. The anxiety that had followed me from home. The windstorm shredding my reasoning, and the desperate need to expel energy in some form or another ravaged my body from the inside out.

I felt myself slipping into that headspace I knew I couldn’t pull back from. It was the place that got me in trouble at school more times than not. The inexplicable agitation and rage that came out of nowhere and took over even when I didn’t want it to.

It’d happened my whole life.

I went from mildly irritated to livid in two seconds with Teddy’s refusal to answer a simple question.

“You fucking stoner-ass freak. I asked you a fucking question. How hard is it to answer?”

“Fuck you. Get out of my apartment, and don’t come back.”

I advanced on him, fearless, intent on proving he wasn’t intimidating. Teddy swung first, and all bets were off. I went into a blind rage, punching, kicking, trying to smash his face any chance I got. Teddy was too slow and too fucked-up to be any match. Despite his age, despite the fact that he was bigger than me, I whaled on him mercilessly.

Jeremy yelled from the hallway. I vaguely processed his warning that someone would call the cops. I distantly understood him when he shouted he was leaving and not getting caught.

“You’re on your own,” he hollered.

All that mattered was smashing Teddy’s face in. The destruction of the things around me didn’t cross my mind or make me slow down. When I

was lost in that mindset, the madness, I rarely remembered why I was fighting in the first place. All I knew was rage. Anger. And the necessity to expel it and get it out of my body before it destroyed me.

Time held no meaning. Reality was skewed, so when a booming voice warned me to stand down, I didn't listen. I couldn't process the command.

It took two large men to pull us apart, and only once the punches stopped flying did I understand the police had arrived.

Fuck. Here we go again.

My senses returned one at a time. I tasted blood from my split lip, heard the voice of a familiar officer as he barked my name, and listened to people murmuring from the hallway. A crowd had gathered. I looked around and blinked in confusion. Jeremy was gone. The apartment was trashed. Shattered bottles littered the floor. The coffee table was upside down, and one leg was splintered. Ashes from the ashtray were scattered. I smelled the sharp tang of alcohol and knew it was from one of the broken bottles.

As clarity returned, one of the officers handcuffed my hands behind my back and spoke in a calm voice by my ear. I knew the voice. I'd dealt with this one a time or two in the past.

"Really, CJ? This is becoming a problem, buddy. Come on. Deep breath and try to calm down."

He dragged me from the ruined apartment and down the long hallway. The other residents of the building slinked back into their apartments as we passed.

The second officer stayed behind with Teddy. I didn't know what would happen to him, but it was none of my business.

With one hand on my bound hands, Officer Baranski helped me down the stairs. I knew him well enough. He'd dealt with me numerous times in the past. Unfortunately, my reputation preceded me, and the man wasn't as surprised as he was disappointed to find me there.

Outside, he dragged me toward his patrol car. There were two parked along the road, their overhead lights flashing and highlighting the buildings on both sides of the street red and blue.

Officer Baranski opened the back door for me, but before I could wedge myself inside, he grabbed my shoulder and spun me to face him.

He was tall. Fit. Intimidating when he wanted to be. But not at that moment. His hazel eyes were warm and filled with a calmness I wouldn't normally attribute to law enforcers. His voice came out just as gently.

“Before we get to the station, figure out who I’m calling this time. Mom or Grandma. Okay?”

I nodded, familiar with the drill.

He still didn’t let me go, and I knew he wanted to say more, so I waited.

“What happened this time?” There was no anger in his question. It was simple curiosity. In fact, he sounded concerned.

“I just got… mad. That freak… he… talked to me like… like… I was a no-good little punk.” I blew out a breath and tried to smooth out my sentences. Everything was so scrambled I couldn’t talk clearly yet. “I hate that… Bad night at home and…”

“These are not the people you should be hanging out with, CJ. Did you take any drugs?”

“No.”

He waited. I sagged under the weight of his heavy stare and squeezed my eyes closed before continuing. “I wanted to… My head… It’s messed up. Needed something to calm it down… but I didn’t. It’s the truth.”

“I’m worried about you. I don’t like to keep dragging you in like this. I’m afraid of where this is all heading. Right now, you’re sixteen, and I’m playing the nice guy card and giving you the benefit of the doubt. When you turn eighteen, it’s gonna be much harder to do that. Despite what you think, I care.”

“I don’t know why. No one else does.” I ducked into the back seat and shuffled to the far side, not wanting to continue the conversation. I hated how stupid I sounded when I couldn’t talk right. I hated the way people looked at me or treated me like I was a waste of space.

I watched out the window, grinding my teeth as residual tremors rippled through my system. My nerves were raw and exposed. Although I could see straight now, it didn’t mean the anger was gone completely.

Because Mom was the lesser of the two evils, I told Officer Baranski to call her. She’d probably yell and throw her own tantrum about what a fuck-up I was, but then she’d ignore me and send me to my room. She never made me do homework or cared if I went out at all hours of the night. With luck, she might not even call my grandparents because it would reflect badly on her.

In truth, she didn’t give two shits about me. I wasn’t certain my grandparents did either. I was an annoyance if anything. When I’d tried to

tell them how much my head bothered me sometimes and how it got me in trouble at school, they'd ignored me or called me a liar. Excuses. I was full of excuses and refused to take responsibility for my actions.

Somewhere in the back of my mind while I waited in a quiet room at the police station for my mom to come and pick me up, I wondered if my dad would have cared. If he would have listened.

The door opening snapped me out of my daze, and Officer Baranski entered. He pulled out the chair beside me and sat, one arm resting on the table. He was relaxed. Calm. The opposite of me.

I lifted my eyes and studied his face while he studied me back.

"Why did the picture go to jail?" he said, breaking the tension. It was one of Officer Baranski's weird quirks. He liked to tell jokes to break the ice. Bad jokes. Horrible jokes. Jokes that weren't even funny.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't know."

"Because he was framed. What do you call it when a prisoner takes his own mugshot?"

"Do you do this to everybody you drag in?"

He held my gaze, waiting for an answer, a slight quirk in the corner of his mouth.

"Fine. I don't know. What?"

"A cell-fie."

"I'm not laughing."

"What's an inmate's favorite place to hang out?"

I shrugged.

"At the bars."

Despite myself, I chuckled and shook my head. "You suck at jokes."

"You smiled that time. Couldn't have been that bad."

"Is Mom here yet?"

"No. She's on her way. How can I help you, CJ? What can I do? I get the strong sense you don't want to be like this, but you feel stuck."

I chewed the inside of my cheek and shrugged. I didn't know what to tell him. It didn't matter.

"There are anger management classes I can try to get you into or maybe I can get you a social worker or therapist if you think you need it."

I made a face and shook my head. "I'm fine. I don't need some freak to talk to."

“You’re not fine, and therapists aren’t freaks. You’ve told me more than once your head is messed up. I don’t know what that means exactly, but have you shared it with Mom or Grandma?”

I laughed without humor. “Yeah. They don’t give a fuck. Wasting my breath trying to make them understand.”

“Okay. Then what would it take to convince you to go to a class? I’d go with you if you wanted. Would that help?”

I stared at the man, uncertain why he was being so nice or even cared. All he ever did was pull me off the street constantly and drag me into the station. It was clear I was fucked up, yet he seemed genuine in his offer to help.

“What do you say?” he asked when I didn’t answer.

“I don’t know. Why would you do that?”

“I just want to give you a fighting chance. Don’t say no right away. Think about it and call me when you decide.”

He slipped a business card across the table, and I picked it up and studied it. Tobias Baranski. So that was his name. When I turned it over, I noticed he’d written his personal cell phone number on the back too. I glanced up and met his eyes. Hazel and warm.

“You’re better than this, kid. Believe me. Don’t keep going on this path. Let me help you.” Then he stood and walked to the door before turning back. “Mom should be here soon. See ya around.”

He left, and I stared at the closed door of the holding room before looking down at his card again. I didn’t know what to make of the gesture, but I did know I’d seen more compassion and concern from a police officer than I had from anyone recently.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Six
Rhyker

OceanofPDF.com

April 2018

I HOPPED DOWN FROM the cab of the truck and handed my clipboard to one of the guys in the loading dock. Once he performed a quick visual inspection, he signed the forms, and I tossed them back in the front of the truck and headed into the main office to check the run schedule for the following week.

Six months ago, I'd gotten my trucking license and took a job with the Quaker factory in town running shipments across the province, and on a rare occasion, outside the province too. It was long hours in an isolated environment, but I liked it. Being on the road gave me time to think, and I'd spent a lot of years trapped inside my head.

Since losing Creed, I'd struggled to get close to people. There'd been no more relationships, and I'd taken to mapping out gay bars on my shipment routes so I could snag hookups in random cities with people I'd never have to see again.

The anonymity suited me fine.

I handed out fake names and few details about my personal life and ensured I was always gone by morning if I went home with somebody. It was easier than trying to form bonds I didn't feel or seeking connections that only reminded me of my pathetic existence.

The main shipment office was empty this late in the evening, so I flipped through the following week's schedule uninterrupted as I noted my next run. It wasn't for two days. They were sending me to Thunder Bay. It was a decent stretch of road and good weather for it, so I didn't mind. There were a few small cities and nice restaurants along the way I enjoyed visiting.

I added the details into my phone and clocked out, intending to head into work early tomorrow to log my trip details when I wasn't so exhausted.

I fished my keys out of my pocket and headed around the back of the building to the employee parking lot. There, I found my beat-up GMC Sierra in the lot. Black like my mood most days. I checked the time on my phone and decided that instead of heading home to my empty apartment where my fridge was as bare as my cupboards, I'd hit a fast food joint and swing by the local gay bar for a pint or two.

It was just after nine on a Friday night. I wasn't completely against picking up guys in my hometown, but I tended to avoid making a habit of it. I didn't need complications or misunderstandings. Or to run into past fucks on the street who I wanted to forget. There were a few guys who'd become regulars, and I'd meet up with them from time to time when the urge struck, but they understood and abided by the same rules.

Friday nights were a sure bet I'd find someone to eliminate some stress with.

First, I drove to a greasy spoon diner not many people knew about on the west edge of town and ordered a hamburger and fries from the owner, Milly, who liked to flirt constantly despite being told a hundred times I didn't swing that way.

In a booth near the window, I picked at my meal as I watched the slow-moving traffic crawling down the street. It was a quieter part of town and one I ventured to frequently when the mood struck.

The neighborhood was nostalgic, in a way, because it was where I'd spent a lot of time with Creed when he was little. The community pool, skating rink, parks, and theater were all a few blocks apart from one another.

It was my own personal way of torturing myself or punishing myself for having given up all those years ago, but I couldn't help gravitating there on occasion just to drown in the memories of the past.

It didn't happen as often anymore, and that too made me sad. The last time I'd allowed myself a selfish minute of reminiscing had probably been a year ago.

Creed would be seventeen now. What was he like? Did he remember me? Did he hate me? How was he doing? Was life treating him well? Did Madison get her head out of her ass and at least become a good mom in the end? Or was it all for naught? Did she take him away from me out of spite only to hate Creed for his whole life and treat him poorly?

I wished I had even one simple answer, but I didn't.

In my head, Creed would always be that tiny nine-year-old boy with the round cheeks, shaved head, and big eyes. The boy who struggled to cope most days but who thought I hung the moon. I missed him.

My meal was tasteless by the time my thoughts took a dive into the dark pit of the past. I shoved my plate aside and wiped my mouth on a napkin, the scant amount I'd eaten turning to cement in my belly.

Staring at my reflection in the window, I noted my drawn features and scruffy face from not having trimmed my beard in a few days. My eyes looked heavier and darker, weighted by emotions. My hair was at least hidden under a ball cap, so the one or two silvers that had appeared in recent days couldn't be seen. I wasn't going to win any fashion show awards with my Quaker work T-shirt and cargos. I'd lost weight this past year but couldn't bring myself to care. I felt a decade older than my thirty-four years. A zombie going through the motions of life.

Shoving the gloomy thoughts of my lost son aside, I debated heading home instead. My mood had tanked, and I wasn't sure I was up to flirting and working for a good fuck.

Twisting the straw in my fountain drink around and around, I weighed my options before deciding, fuck it, I didn't care. If one of my regulars were at the bar, they wouldn't care about my shit mood either. Maybe some release would perk me up and make me feel alive again.

I settled my bill and drove to the only gay bar in Peterborough—Desires. It was no big-city dance club or wild party scene, it was simply a decent place of mediocre size that played respectable music and catered to more than nineteen-year-old frat boys looking for a good time. Even my thirty-four-year-old ass fit in.

In fact, there were more men in their late twenties and thirties than there were nineteen and twenty-year-old guys.

It was close to ten when I strolled in the front doors. The lighting was dim, and the scent of stale beer lingered in the air. A few younger guys hovered around the pool table, studying the scattering of balls over the top as they focused on their game. Although not packed, there weren't many tables available, so I slipped onto an empty stool at the bar and ordered a beer from Walter, one of the regular bartenders I knew quite well.

"You're back in town." Walter's tone was matter-of-fact as he filled my usual pint from the tap. Just the right amount of head.

"Yeah. Just got in. I'll be out again in two days though, so don't get excited."

Walter dropped a coaster on the sticky surface in front of me and placed the mug of beer he'd finished pouring on top, droplets of condensation sliding down the glass and pooling around the base.

"Man, they sure keep you moving, don't they?"

"Yup. I like it. Keeps me busy."

I tipped the mug to my mouth and downed a few good swallows as Walter helped another guy several stools down. Shifting in my seat, I scanned the faces around the bar.

“Rich or Parker around?” I asked Walter.

“Nope. Haven’t seen Rich in a couple of weeks, and Parker was having some issues with the ex-wife. Custody battle or some shit over the twins. He was in a state last I saw him.”

I peered back over my shoulder at Walter. “That so?”

“Yup. He was raving mad on Tuesday. Got himself good and fucked up, too. Something about court dates and child support.”

It made me wonder what all Parker’s ex was trying to get from him. Would she take his girls and split too? I’d learned over the years, my case wasn’t as random of an occurrence as I’d once thought. Unfortunately, scores of parents took off with their kids every day never to be seen again. I’d become a statistic.

As much as I didn’t know a whole lot about Parker outside the bedroom, I hoped for his sake that my luck didn’t rub off on him. No one deserved the shit I’d gone through.

Submitting to the fact that I wasn’t going to get anywhere tonight, I chugged my beer and slid the empty toward Walter.

“Later, man.”

“Takin’ off already?” He seemed genuinely hurt at my sudden departure, but all I could do was shrug.

“Yeah. Might as well go home and crash. Not feeling up to working for a prize tonight, if you know what I mean?”

Walter chuckled and shook his head, knowing why I’d come and why I was leaving so abruptly. I didn’t care. I didn’t go out of my way to hide my sexual adventures. Not anymore. Nor was I ashamed of them. Walter wasn’t stupid, and he’d seen me leave the bar more than a few times with random guys.

“Take care, my man. Pop in when you get back. Maybe stay for conversation next time.”

“Will do.” I tossed a few dollars onto the bar top and waved before leaving.

I drove home to my walk-up apartment on the third level of an old Victorian house a few blocks from the downtown area. Three of us rented floors in the century-old building. Kirk was on the first floor, a forty-year-

old guy who was a janitor at the local high school. He was a miserable shit but mostly kept to himself.

The second floor was rented out by a woman named Judith. She traveled more than I did for work and was rarely home. She was in her mid-thirties and had spent the first two weeks after I'd moved in trying to convince me to go out with her on a date. When I'd finally told her I was gay, she'd backed off. We'd become good friends.

We hung out on occasion, but for the most part, our jobs and schedules clashed.

Once I parked in the oversized driveway and killed the engine, I got out and tipped my head to the sky, admiring the splash of stars above. For a long moment, I became transfixed by their beauty. Countless little diamonds, light years away, winking down on the world and the billions of people who inhabited it. I felt small in their presence, and the moment made me think about Parker and his kids. Madison and her parents.

Creed.

Did he ever look at the stars and think about me? Was he out there somewhere in the world asking himself similar questions? If something had happened to him, would I know?

That thought stabbed painfully into my heart. I clutched my chest and shook away the thoughts of him. He'd weighed heavy on my mind today for some reason, and I didn't know why. It was better when I managed long stretches of time without going there.

Remembering was torture.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Seven
Creed

OceanofPDF.com

November 2019

I PACED THE PARKING lot, snapping the thick black rubber band on my wrist hard enough to cause a sharp sting every time it sprang back and connected with flesh. The pain kept me grounded, forced my mind to stay in one place, and prevented me from falling into the darkness where I became reactive and angry. Lashed out and did things I shouldn't.

I was learning. Slowly.

More like coping.

Over and over. Pacing. Back and forth.

Snap, snap, snap…

Toby's gaze followed me as he leaned against his patrol car, still in full uniform despite his shift ending twenty minutes ago.

I tore up the asphalt underfoot, my sole focus on bringing myself down to a level I could communicate. I'd been waiting for Toby to get back for well over an hour before he'd finally pulled in. A full hour of fighting against myself and keeping the storms at bay.

His partner had noticed my agitation and left us alone.

Toby didn't say a word. With more patience than I could understand, he waited, watching me. His hazel eyes were filled with a calmness I could never fully emulate but one I respected and relied upon more and more these past three years.

"I need to leave," I blurted. But that wasn't where I wanted to start. I scrubbed a rough hand over my face and ground my teeth before I resumed snapping the band, eating up the pain. The inside of my wrist was red and inflamed, but I didn't care. "I can't… They… I just…"

With a growl, I kicked the front tire on his cruiser, frustrated that I couldn't voice my thoughts in a coherent fashion. Everything felt like it was flying at me at once.

Toby pushed away from the car and squared off with me, snagging my shoulder before I could get away or kick the car again. It was not meant as an intimidation tactic but merely to draw my attention. Vibrating, I released the tension in my jaw and looked up at him searchingly.

"Do you need some gym time? Maybe we go beat the fuck out of a bag for an hour, and then you try to say what you need to say. Is there a rush? Do I need to know this instant?"

I shook my head and made fists with my hands, hard enough the skin around my knuckles felt like it would tear open. I could almost feel the relief of slamming punches into the bag, letting out all the chaos making me unable to see straight.

“What do you think, CJ?”

“Yeah. Need to punch.”

Toby unclipped a smaller set of keys off the larger ring attached to his belt and tossed them at me. “Go get in the car. I’m gonna clock out. Be back in a few minutes.”

I nodded and shifted away toward where the officers parked their personal vehicles only to be halted by Toby calling my name.

“CJ?” When I turned, his concern was vivid in the deep grooves marring his forehead. Once he knew I was listening, he continued. “Take some deep breaths. Remember all those useful tricks you’ve been learning. Now is a good time to practice them, yeah?”

“’Kay.”

And I would. I’d do my best.

In the front seat of his Kia Sportage, I folded myself in half with my head on my lap and arms wrapped around my legs. I continuously snapped the rubber band, listening to the steady thrum each time I plucked it and it met skin. I counted. Kept my breathing even and deep. Closing my eyes, I did all I could to clear my head and not think of the shit I’d just dealt with at Mom’s. I really needed to talk to Toby and tell him my plan, but I couldn’t do that unless I calmed down.

By the time Toby got in the driver’s side, I wasn’t shaking anymore, and my breathing had evened out. Leaving the band alone for the first time in over an hour, I sat up and buckled my belt, staring out the windshield, unable to make eye contact.

Toby didn’t push. He turned the key and put us on the road toward the gym a few blocks away. I knew he kept a gym bag in the trunk, and recently, that bag included something for me to wear too in case our gym time happened randomly—like today.

When we arrived, he collected his gear from the trunk, and we wandered in, finding the men’s locker rooms without speaking to each other. We changed into loose shorts and old, pit-stained T-shirts before heading to the area of the gym where a bunch of heavy punching bags hung.

Toby had taught me some moves, both punching and kicking, just enough to allow me to safely let off steam.

He tossed me a pair of gloves and positioned himself behind the bag, holding it and waving me forward.

I let all my anxiety and frustration surface and laid into the bag with everything I had, growling and yelling out with each forceful punch as the energy leached from my body and expelled itself through hits to the bag.

Over and over. Left and right. A few kicks for variety then more hits again. Each fell in quick succession.

“That’s it. Get it out. Hit the bag.” Toby's voice was a distant chant, encouraging me to expel the poison.

Sweat trickled down my brow. My skin was on fire. But I didn’t stop.

Left. Right. Left. Left. Right. Kick. Kick.

Whenever I paused, Toby asked calmly, “Is that enough?”

And I shook my head and kept going.

Only when my body ached, muscles trembled, and chest heaved did I rip off the gloves and throw them on the mat on the ground. Bent over with hands on my knees, I panted, gasping air as I fought to catch my breath. I’d been at it for nearly an hour.

The room was empty, so Toby didn’t have to drag me out of the way of listening ears. He approached, squared himself in front of me, and waited until I stood straight. He clasped my shoulders and bent slightly so we were eye to eye since he was several inches taller than me.

He pinned me with a serious expression. “Now say it.”

Chest heaving, sweat dripping, I nodded. “I can’t live there anymore. Mom fucking hates me. Grandpa just stares at me like I have some contagious disease, and Grandma mutters and makes faces all the time. I think they know I’m gay. Maybe I’m just paranoid. I don’t know. But I can’t do it. I can’t. Plus all the things they say about me. The names they call me. I can’t, Toby. I can’t. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.”

Despite my exhaustion, despite all the effort I’d put into calming my head, my teeth chattered, and the internal tremors returned.

“Breathe, CJ.”

I tried. I sucked in ragged mouthfuls of air and unconsciously reached for my rubber band. Toby didn’t stop me. He knew it helped. He’d encouraged it as a method of bringing myself back down. Mom hated it and mocked it. Grandpa said I was attention-seeking.

“I’m going to run away.”

“Don’t be reactive.”

“I’m not. I’ve thought about it a lot. I’m nineteen. They can’t stop me. They won’t even care. They’ll probably be happy.”

“Yeah, you’re nineteen, but you don’t even have a high school diploma or a job. What are your intentions?”

I opened my mouth and shut it again. The tiny fantasy I’d been toying with for weeks suddenly felt ridiculous when I was going to voice it out loud.

“Say it.”

“I want to find my dad.”

Toby’s eyes narrowed a sliver. Not in a skeptical way but in a way that told me he was thinking about what I said. “Do you know where he is?”

“No. And they won’t tell me anything. I just need to find him. Toby, maybe…” I let the words die on my tongue. If it was stupid to say I wanted to find my dad, surely the idea that he was this wonderful great man who would love me and be part of my life was ludicrous and laughable.

“Maybe he’ll give a shit?” Toby finished my thought for me.

Snap, snap, snap…

I nodded and bit my lip hard enough to draw blood. It wasn’t a rash decision. He’d been on my mind for a long time.

“How do you know your dad didn’t walk out years ago and doesn’t care about you?”

“I don’t know. But if that was true, then why wouldn’t they say it? When I ask about him, Mom gets all flustered and angry. She just tells me to mind my own fucking business like I have no right to ask. She talks in circles sometimes and contradicts herself, but God forbid I draw attention to it. Grandma won’t give me a straight answer either, and Grandpa just tells me he was a bad man. They said they have no pictures and no information, but it’s lies, Toby. Lies. I know it is. I remember him. I was little, but I remember. It wasn’t like they say. He wasn’t bad. He was good. We did stuff together. I remember us laughing and having fun.”

He liked me.

Toby released my shoulders and stood. From our discarded bag, he unearthed a water bottle and tossed it at me. Then he paced, rubbing his jaw where a faint bit of his five-o’clock shadow was beginning to show. “I don’t

know, CJ. Like you said, you were little. Maybe there's a reason he's not around. Maybe—"

"I can't stay there anymore. I'm running away one way or the other. Might as well try to find him. I'm not a kid anymore. If he's some fucking asshole and doesn't want to know me, so be it."

But he's not. I know he's not.

"Then what? Where do you live? How do you eat? And if you don't know where he is, then where are you even starting this search?"

"We moved from Peterborough, Ontario when I was nine. It's not any bigger than Saint John. I looked it up. I'm gonna go there. If he… If he isn't like I remember, fine. I'll figure it out."

"And how are you getting there?"

I shrugged, knowing Toby wouldn't like the answer. It didn't matter, the cop inside him made him a pro at reading minds and sifting through my bullshit.

"You're going to hitchhike, aren't you?"

"Maybe."

"I can't let you do that. It's dangerous."

"I'll be fine."

"It's illegal."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. No, it's not."

"It is so if you plan to solicit rides along the major highways."

"So are you gonna arrest me, Officer Baranski?"

"CJ, I'm trying to help you."

"You wanna help me? Help me find my dad. You have all those fancy computer finder things at your work. Look him up and help me locate him."

"It doesn't work that way, kid. If he's in Ontario, it's not our jurisdiction. We'd have to request access. Unless he has a record, he won't be in their system at all. Period. Have you tried social media?"

"Dead end. The guy either doesn't do that or goes by some weird name I don't know about."

"Gee, sound familiar, CJ InDaHood?"

"Fuck." I hadn't thought about how hard I'd made myself to find too.

Staring at the floor, the weight of defeat drew my shoulders down and made my body heavy.

"Listen," Toby said, drawing my attention away from the turmoil in my head. "Keep working at your diploma. You were doing really well with the

online courses. I'll help you make a resume, and we can try to find you work. Maybe we can get you out of your grandparents' house sometime this year."

But *sometime this year* was too long to wait. Every day at home was a struggle. Every minute was a battle of holding my tongue or stilling my rage. Grandpa pushed my buttons and provoked me. Mom taunted me and got a thrill out of setting me off.

Plus… I was gay, and it was only a matter of time before that secret came out.

"I can't wait," I whispered, meeting Toby's worried gaze. "Why can't I live with you?"

He sighed. "We've been over this."

"But I'm an adult now. It wouldn't be inappropriate anymore."

"My place is too small, and having a nineteen-year-old around won't do me favors when my fiancée is none too fond of the time I spend with you already. Plus, she's there a lot and having you there would kinda… dampen certain things." He quirked a brow, and I knew exactly what *things* he meant.

"Plus she hates me."

"Jessica doesn't hate you."

"Whatever. She calls me your little pet project."

"Fuck that. You don't believe that shit, do you?"

I shrugged, cutting my gaze to the ground, cracking open the water bottle and taking a long swig.

"You're really adamant about leaving, aren't you?"

"My bag's already packed. I'm taking off tonight once they fall asleep. Gonna steal my birth certificate and whatever else he has in his office that is mine or has to do with Dad."

"Fuck!" Toby spun in place and ripped a hand through his hair. "CJ, don't jump ship before thinking."

"I have thought. I'm done with all this bullshit. I'm too stupid for school. I'm barely passing those online classes. No one will hire me because I have a reputation in this town of being a violent kid no one can trust. They treat me like a felon. I'm the fucked-up kid with a cop who follows him around to keep him in line."

"That's not how it is, and you know it."

"*I* know. But they don't. They see what they want."

“You’ve come a long way from the violent sixteen-year-old I kept pulling off the street. When is the last time you got in a fight?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “We’ve done dozens of classes together. Look at yourself. Look how well you manage your outbursts now. I’m so proud of you, CJ. You’ll get there. You’ll get your diploma. You’ll get a job, and we’ll make it a priority to find you an apartment. Don’t fly off the handle and run away because you have vague memories of a father who hasn’t been in your life for ten years.”

I stared at the mat under my running shoes. Felt the give of the cushioned surface as I rocked from foot to foot. The circuits in my brain were misfiring again, sending me mixed messages and making me twitchy and unable to stay my anger. It burned me up and flowed through my body. I snapped the band on my wrist, trying to ground myself. The overhead fluorescent lights buzzed louder and louder.

Toby didn’t say another word, but he recognized my elevating distress. He picked up the gloves I’d tossed aside and shoved them against my chest.

“Another round. Let’s go.”

I spent another hour laying punches into the heavy bag until I couldn’t lift my arms any longer. When I stopped, Toby guided me to the locker rooms without a word and encouraged me to shower and cool off.

By the time we were outside and in his SUV again, he turned to me. “I get the feeling no matter what I say, you’re going to run. I’m not gonna lie. I think it’s a bad decision. I’m worried about you. If you go, promise me you’ll at least check in. You have my number. Keep your phone charged, and call me every night. Every. Fucking. Night, CJ. Do you hear me?”

I nodded but refused to meet his eyes.

He threw the vehicle in drive, but instead of taking me home, he drove to a bank. Confused, I watched as he went through the drive-thru and punched buttons on the ATM. Once we’d cleared the lane, he pulled to the side and handed me a wad of bills.

“That’s five hundred bucks. Use it wisely. Maybe get a bus ticket instead of hitchhiking and pay for cheap hotel rooms. Get food so you don’t starve. Do not buy smokes and alcohol with it. Be smart. Use your head.”

“I can’t take your money.”

“Yeah, you can and you will. Keep me posted, kid. I’m serious.”

He tucked the insane amount of cash into my hand and paused. The heat of his gaze burned hot enough, I finally looked up into his determined

hazel eyes.

“And don’t get your ass arrested.”

“I won’t.”

With a defeated breath, he faced forward and put the vehicle in drive, taking me out of town and down the dirt road to my grandparents’. When he pulled to the end of the driveway by the house and stopped, neither of us moved.

I found Toby’s eyes in the dark. “Thank you.”

Without thought, Toby pulled me over the middle console and engulfed me in a tight hug. No one had hugged me in years. No one cared. My eyes burned as I squeezed him back, burying my face in his shoulder and trying not to let the emotions take over. Toby had saved my life. I knew without a doubt that had he not reached out and offered to help me three years ago, I’d probably be in jail or dead by now.

“Be careful, kid.” He released the hug but didn’t let me go far. He clasped a hand behind my neck and pinned me with his hard cop stare. The one that commanded I listen and hear every word he said. “I’m serious, CJ. I’m just a phone call away. Don’t hesitate, and please keep me posted or I’ll worry.”

“I will. I promise.”

Before he let me go, he tossed me one stupid joke for the road.

“Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?” I asked, smirking because this was Toby’s way of cutting the tension.

“Olive.”

“Olive who?”

“Olive you, buddy. Be safe.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t stop the stupid grin from taking over my face. “You’re an idiot. Olive you too. I will.”

Standing on the gravel driveway, I watched Toby leave, the taillights on his Sportage eventually disappearing as he headed back down the road toward town. The country was dark and quiet. In a few hours, I’d take to the road one way or another and see where I wound up. For the time being, I needed to deal with my grandparents. The lights were still on downstairs, so I knew they were up.

It was a good thing I was exhausted and more stable than earlier, or I would have probably gotten myself in more trouble. What I needed was to

crash for a couple of hours so I could go all night and get far away before anyone knew I was missing.

I entered the front door on light feet and made my way to the stairs that led to the second level.

“CJ, is that you?” Grandma called from the front room.

“Yeah. Just going to bed.”

“Your dinner is on a plate in the fridge.”

“He’s late,” Grandpa barked over the top of her. “He shouldn’t get to have dinner if he can’t show up on time. It’s disrespectful.”

“I’m not hungry, anyway.”

That settled that. I clomped up the stairs, no longer concerned over being quiet.

In my room, I locked the door and pulled my overfilled backpack out from where I’d wedged it under my bed. I stuffed the money Toby had given me into three separate pockets and double-checked I hadn’t missed anything important when packing.

I had a few changes of clothes, my charge cord for my phone, a set of earbuds, a handful of snacks I’d stolen from the kitchen, and toiletries. There was little room for anything else. I’d loaded my phone with all kinds of music, downloaded a few seasons of some shows I’d meant to watch, and now I had money.

I was set.

A shower, a few hours of sleep, and I was out of here.

It was five in the morning when I arrived at the train and bus station in town. The sun was still down, and there was a cool nip in the air. November wasn’t a good month to run away. I’d freeze my balls off if I wasn’t careful. At least it wasn’t snowing.

I huddled under my hoodie and blew hot air into my palms while I checked and compared prices between busses and trains heading toward Ontario. I didn’t want to blow the money Toby had given me, but I also knew he’d much prefer I didn’t hitch rides with strangers.

The bus was cheaper, and there was one leaving in a little more than an hour that was heading to Ottawa. Ottawa was about as close as I was going to get at this point, so I jumped on it.

I paid for a ticket and waited around in the sheltered station for boarding time. Once on the bus, I found a seat at the very back all alone.

The first thing I did as we rolled out of the station was send Toby a text to let him know I was gone.

CJ: Got a bus to Ottawa. Just left. Not sure what I'm doing from there. I'll sort it out.

Toby: I'm glad. Makes me feel a lot better. Be safe. Stay in touch.

For the duration of my eleven-hour bus ride, I listened to music, slept, and did a million and one searches for anyone named Rhyker Collins in Peterborough, Ontario. There was no Facebook page, no Instagram, and no Twitter for a person of that name. I couldn't find a single hit. Just like all the times I'd tried before. A small niggling worry itched under my skin. What if I was going all this way and he wasn't there anymore? What if he'd died and no one told me?

I snapped my rubber band and watched the scenery out the window as it rolled by. All these years I'd created these fantasy ideas of my father. I imagined finding him and discovering how alike we both were. How warm and accepting he was. In my daydreams, he listened to me talk, he understood when I told him about my struggles, and he offered to take me to the gym like Toby did. In my mind, he was a lot like Toby. Understanding. Patient. Caring. Except, he was my dad, so it was more. The missing piece, the hollow ache I felt in my chest all the time, the yearning for a loving parent was found in this faceless man I hadn't seen in a decade. He would be everything.

Snap, snap, snap…

Was I being naïve? Unrealistic? Was I placing him on a pedestal where he didn't belong? Had I given him hero qualities he didn't deserve?

Maybe when I found him, he'd tell me to fuck off. Maybe he didn't want a son and that was why I hadn't seen him in years.

I squeezed my eyes closed and forced away the negative thoughts so I didn't start freaking out. Being on a bus for this long was already making me stir crazy. The last thing I needed was to lose control.

I'd figure it out when I got there. According to the internet, Peterborough had a population of just under eighty-five thousand. That didn't sound too awful, right? I could find one man in eighty-five thousand. It wasn't like I was heading to Toronto where the population was in the millions.

Boy, was I wrong. Three days into my search, directionless in a city I didn't know, I was ready to give up.

Finding Rhyker Collins was like finding a needle in a haystack.

“You’re being impatient,” Toby said through the phone.

“I just thought it’d be easier than this. Do you know how many dirty looks I get? This one lady acted like I was gonna mug her right out in the street in broad daylight just ’cause I asked a question. Fuck me.”

“You’re young, CJ. Check your attitude when you’re asking people. No one wants to deal with a punk-ass kid.”

“I’m not a—”

“You're being reactive. If that’s how you are with people, no one will help you.”

I sighed and kicked a crushed pop can into the street. “What do you suggest?”

“Try asking around at businesses instead of cornering people on the street. Gas station attendants. Grocery store clerks. Convenience store owners. Attacking random Joes in public could cause a problem. You look young and edgy. People will feel threatened or nervous talking to you.”

“I’m not edgy.” I sighed. “This would be easier if I had a picture of him or knew how to describe him. I wish my memories weren’t so fuzzy.”

“Where have you been spending the night?”

“A shitty motel for thirty bucks a night. I can’t keep that up. The bus ticket gouged me.”

“You’re doing good. It’s better than being in the street. Make sure you get at least one good meal in too.”

“I am. There are a lot of cheap-ass restaurants and bars in the area.”

“Do not spend that money on alcohol, kid, or I’ll kick your ass.” I heard the chirp of Toby’s police radio in the background and some muffled jargon of codes as dispatch talked to Toby. “I gotta split. Call me tomorrow and let me know how you’re making out.”

“I will.”

“Remember to breathe, CJ. Don’t let your frustration set you off. You’re doing good.”

We hung up, and I glanced up and down the street. *Good* would have been finding my dad when I got here. Unfortunately, that hadn’t happened. The more days that passed, the more convinced I became that I was chasing a man who wasn’t around anymore.

I needed to take Toby’s advice. Quit attacking random strangers and make a point of going to a few businesses tomorrow.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eight
Rhyker

IT WAS NINE when I pushed through the doors to Desires. I'd gone home after four days on the road, showered, trimmed my beard, and styled my mop of dark hair. Then I headed out immediately, my goal being a few beers, some spicy, bar-type finger food, and hopefully a bit of stress relief if Parker or Rich were around.

For nine o'clock, Desires was surprisingly busy. Not packed, but there were enough customers around to make it lively. Walter had the music up and the lights down low already. I ambled through the sporadic groupings of people and stole the only available seat at the bar between two guys.

The guy on the left was a familiar regular. Walter called him Fabio because he worked the crowd with the ease of a player and was drop-dead gorgeous with his warm brown skin, black hair, and an alluring smile that showed off brilliant white teeth. It was rare for anyone to turn him down. I had no clue what his real name was.

Rumor had it, he was pretty wild between the sheets too, but I'd never bothered to find out personally. He was too outgoing and too flirtatious. Too local. I preferred men with a bit more subtlety to them. The last thing I needed was my business all over town. Fabio was proud to acknowledge his conquests to anyone who would listen.

Rich and Parker shared my philosophy, so why mess with a good thing?

The guy on my right wasn't someone I'd seen before. He was young. Young enough, I questioned if he should be at the bar in the first place, but Walter was diligent about IDing anyone of questionable age. The last thing he wanted was to lose his license because he served a minor.

Pin-straight blond hair hung to the kid's chin, blocking his face as he studied the bar top, running his fingers along the old grooves in the wood. He was small, almost delicate in his features, with full lips and long lashes covering eyes I couldn't quite make out. He wore a black hoodie, tattered

jeans, and heavy black boots with clunky silver buckles. On his one arm was a wide black rubber bracelet, on the other was a half dozen more trinkets made of stainless steel chain links.

It was funny how contradicting his outfit was compared to the pretty thing underneath. Like he was going for an edgy look but wasn't quite pulling it off.

On the bar top in front of him was an empty mug of beer and a half-eaten plate of fries with a blob of ketchup that had been thoroughly smeared about.

I sat, and he didn't lift his head or react in any way. Fabio—or whatever his real name was—nudged my shoulder with a grin as he sipped his beer.

"I've been itching for your kind of company. Always avoiding me, stranger. How are you doing?"

Our eyes clashed for a minute before I gave him a look of disgust and turned to find Walter, waving a hand and indicating I wanted a beer. "What'd I tell you last time?"

"I like a challenge."

"Same answer. No thank you."

Walter dropped off my beer and lingered, knowing how much I didn't enjoy this guy's attention. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. How about a dozen chicken wings. Extra spicy."

"Done and done." Looking at Fabio, Walter pointed a finger in his face with mock warning etched into a sneer. "Don't you be causing no trouble in here, hot stuff. There are plenty of other guys you can harass. Leave my man alone."

Fabio laughed and held up his hands in defeat as Walter walked away.

"His man, huh? Didn't know you and Walter—"

"We aren't. We don't."

Because I was through engaging with him, I swiveled on my stool, giving him my back as I faced the blond on the other side. He hadn't moved and was still dazed out, dissecting the bar top with a slow-moving finger.

I studied him for a beat then nudged his elbow to grab his attention. "Can I get you a top-up? You look like your dog died."

Startled, his head shot up, and he blinked at me with eyes so blue they caught me off guard. Blue and framed by sun-bleached blond hair that stood out against his darker lashes. He shook his head to clear whatever trance

had taken hold of him and glanced across the bar to the wall of liquor on the other side, then down at his empty like he'd just realized where he was and what I was asking.

"Oh… Um… Sure."

Unable to take my eyes off him, I waved at Walter and indicated for him to refill the kid's mug. There was something familiar about the blond, but I couldn't place my finger on it.

"You all right?" I asked when he started playing with a French fry. Not eating it but dragging it through the ketchup and painting the plate.

"Yeah. Just been a rough couple of days."

Walter delivered him the new beer, and the kid nodded his thanks as Walter wandered off, waggling his eyebrows subtly in my direction, telling me what he thought of the young stranger.

Yeah, he was cute and pretty, but he was awfully young. Far younger than my usual hookups.

"Thanks for the beer." Those stunning blue eyes found mine again, and he smiled. For the second time, I was struck by a sense of familiarity. Like I'd met him somewhere before.

"You live around here?" I asked, not used to prying information out of strangers. I was big on privacy and respected it in others. Usually. But there was something about this kid that made me curious. Something that drew me to break my own rules.

"No. I'm from Saint John, New Brunswick. Only been in town a couple of days."

"New Brunswick? Wow. You're a long way from home. What brought you here?"

He sighed and rolled his eyes, turning back to his beer and sipping. "Chasing ghosts, apparently. I don't want to talk about it. It will piss me off, and I came here to relax for one night and not think about it."

"Fair enough. Your business is yours. You got a name?"

He tipped his head to the side and gave me a not-so-subtle scan, slowly, taking in every part of me. I was glad I'd gone home and made an effort to look put together. While I wasn't generally interested in hookups in my hometown, this guy wasn't from around here, so he was a perfect exception to my rule.

The corner of his mouth quirked up into an almost grin, and I recognized the approving glimmer in his eyes.

He swiveled, facing me, and held out his hand, metal chains jangling as he moved. “CJ.”

CJ.

Yeah, he was young-looking, but he was drinking, so that made him at least nineteen, right? He wasn’t my normal type, but I couldn’t deny the slight buzz of curiosity running under my skin. He was cute. And something about his compact little frame drew my mind into the gutter as I imagined all the nasty things I could do to him.

I shook his hand with a firm grip, holding on a little longer so he understood my returned interest and gave him a ravenous smile of my own. “Ryan. You can call me Ryan.”

It was close enough to my real name and one I used often with hookups. Enough anonymity to keep them out of my personal life yet not so different from my real name that I would forget to respond if they used it.

“Nice to meet you.” CJ picked up his beer and clinked his glass to mine before drinking deep. When he lowered his mug, he licked the foam from his upper lip, drawing my attention to his pink tongue and the slow journey it took from left to right.

CJ’s gaze roamed the bar before returning to mine. “I’ve never been to a gay bar before. I always thought they’d be wilder, you know? Filled with half-naked men all grinding on each other. Sweaty blowjobs in dark corners. I’m kinda disappointed.”

I chuckled, unable to drag my gaze from his face and those damp lips. “It’s not a club, sweetheart. Is that what you were hoping for? A blowjob in a dark corner?”

He shrugged but the smile he tried to hide said it all. Yes, that was exactly what he was hoping for.

“Besides,” I continued, “I can’t imagine you’ve been in many bars.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I have a hard time believing you’re old enough to be in here to begin with. If I didn’t know Walter was so stringent about carding the younger kids, I’d have said you snuck in.”

CJ scoffed and frowned. “I’m not some fucking kid. Don’t call me that. How old do you think I am?”

I took the opportunity to scan his body, noting all the little things about him before answering. The faint muscles hidden under his loose clothing,

the pale skin by his collar, the way he angled his lower body so his leg touched mine. “Not a day over nineteen.”

“Fuck you. What if I told you I’m twenty-one?”

“I’d call you a liar.”

“Well, I am.” He shifted back to face the bar top and drank deeply from his mug of beer. The lost eye contact only proved my point. That and the hint of color rising up his neck. Maybe he was twenty-one, but I wouldn’t bet money on it.

I nudged his knee with my own and caught his eye again. I’d hurt his feelings and needed to drag us back into neutral territory.

“You know, nineteen is perfectly legal. I wasn’t insulting you. There isn’t anything wrong with that. I was just fuckin’ with ya.”

He considered my words as he spun his beer on the bar top, knee bouncing, fingers drumming on the glass surface of his mug. “Yeah, I’m nineteen, but at least I’m not some old man, hitting on a barely legal kid.”

“You’re a fucking brat is what you are. Who said I’m hitting on you?”

“Please.” He rolled his eyes and couldn’t hide his smile.

We both laughed as Walter emerged from the back kitchen with my plate of wings. He dropped it on the counter with two small plates and a stack of napkins before eyeing our dwindling drinks. “Top-ups?”

“Yeah. On my tab.” As Walter walked to the taps, I called out, “You ID’d this one, right?”

“Your soul is safe.”

“Why are you so worried about my age?” CJ asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Because.” I leaned closer, dropping my voice. “Otherwise, my thoughts are illegal, and they’ll throw my ass in jail.”

“Ah, so you *are* flirting. What are those thoughts, anyhow? Do they include dark corners and blowjobs? I won’t say no.”

“Mmm… Drink. We’ll get there. Chicken wing?” I slid the plate over to the middle and encouraged him to try one.

He plucked one from the plate and nibbled at it, his full lips sucking the meat off the bone in a nearly provocative manner. I stilled and watched, fighting the rush of blood pooling in my lower body at the sight. It didn’t help when he started sucking his fingers clean with enough pull to hollow his cheeks.

“Fuck, these are spicy.” He tossed the bare bone on the side of the plate and licked his lips again. They’d grown red with the heat of the wings, and he snagged his beer, downing a few mouthfuls.

“Yup. I like them hot.” *And young, apparently.* “Have another.”

I hadn’t tried one myself, but I didn’t care. I could watch this kid eat all night. It was incredibly erotic, and the more he used his tongue to lick at the sauce, the more he sucked on his fingers when he was done, the more I wanted him. The more I envisioned those lips sucking other things.

“Are you just gonna watch me?” he said with his mouth full, brow raised. “I’m gonna eat all your food.”

“Don’t much care. The show is something else.”

He smirked. “You’re totally thinking dirty thoughts right now, aren’t you?”

“I swear you’re fucking teasing me, sucking your fingers like that.”

He shrugged and kept it up, exaggerating the already seductive action.

Dragging my gaze away, I helped myself to a wing, and we ate them in silence. He held my whole attention, and he knew it.

Halfway through the plate of wings, CJ turned to me and grinned as he dabbed his mouth with a napkin. “You like jokes?” Without pause, he continued. “What did the evil chicken lay?”

I shook my head, confused. “Excuse me? What?”

“It’s a joke. Take a guess. What did the evil chicken lay?”

I tilted my head with a growing smile, unsure what was going on. “I don’t know. What?”

“Deviled eggs.”

My brows hit my hairline as I shook my head. “That… That was terrible.”

“Why did the rooster run away?”

I paused for a second to consider then shrugged.

“He was chicken. What type of plant do chickens grow on?”

“This is awful. What are you doing?”

“Eggplants. I have more. My friend back home is the king of stupid fucking jokes. Tells them nonstop to pull me out of my funks and break the ice when the tension gets too high. Wanna hear another?”

“I’m begging you to stop. Please. They’re terrible.”

CJ laughed and tossed his napkin aside. “I know. I tell him that all the time, but he said whatever makes me smile isn’t a bad thing. So how old are

you? You know, since you seem hung up on my age. You don’t look that old.”

“How about we go with twenty-seven?”

“Wow, and I’m the liar.”

“Fuck you, kid. I could be twenty-seven.”

“Yeah, and I could be forty-nine.”

“Holy shit. I’m not forty-nine.”

I shoved the last few wings away and finished my beer. We’d both swung around to face each other again, our legs resting against one another like earlier.

“Come on. Tell me for real.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanna know. Don’t worry,” he said, leaning in and lowering his voice, his hand resting on my upper thigh and squeezing. “I won’t call you Daddy or nothin’. Unless you want me to?”

I almost spit my mouthful of beer. Swallowing it fast, coughing because it went down the wrong pipe, I laughed. “Jesus, please don’t. That’s just… No.”

He laughed too but didn’t remove his hand. It slid higher until his thumb caressed the crease of my thigh, brushing subtly against my groin and stirring things to life. “So. If I’m not too young for you and you’re not too old for me, then what do you say we take this somewhere else?”

“What, like a dark corner for a blowjob?”

CJ rolled his eyes again and shrugged. “Whatever. Or a private room. Somewhere we can get naked and fuck. I mean, if you’re interested.”

I studied his face, the glimmer in his eyes telling me the few extra beers I’d bought him were doing their job. He was loose and pliable and willing—and old enough. Even though he was probably the youngest guy I’d picked up.

And he knew what he wanted.

I took his wandering hand and pressed his palm to my growing erection, grinding against it once as I leaned in to whisper in his ear. “What does that tell you about my interest?”

“You got a place?”

I paused, considering. I didn’t like bringing people to my house, but since he was from out of town and I probably wouldn’t see him again, I couldn’t see the harm.

“Yeah. Not too far away.”

I released his wrist, but he didn’t remove his hand. He stroked me through my pants, his own erection visible even under his loose jeans.

I let him get in a few minutes of fondling, enjoying the attention, before pulling away and meeting his pale blue eyes. “Not here. You make me come in my pants, Walter won’t let me live it down. I gotta live in this town, you know? I’m not into giving others a show.”

CJ chuckled and withdrew as I waved Walter over and handed him my credit card, telling him to put the kid’s fries on my tab too.

“Thanks,” CJ said as he pulled a tattered black canvas backpack over his shoulder. It had patches representing metal bands and drug symbols all over it, reminding me of my youth and the shit I used to enjoy once upon a time.

Once I’d squared away with Walter, I guided CJ from the bar and pointed him down the road to where I’d parked. He got in the truck as I rounded to the driver’s side. As we headed down the road, I stole a few glimpses at the young man beside me. I couldn’t shake the sense of familiarity, but no matter how hard I tried to figure it out, I didn’t know how I knew him. He didn’t show signs of knowing me, so I was probably mistaken. In the end, I figured he must look like someone I knew or a past hookup. Especially since he wasn’t from around here.

“Where you staying?” I asked when I considered how little he’d shared earlier.

He shrugged and continued to stare out the window. “Was staying at that shit motel on Garble Avenue.”

That was a crappy end of town, and the motel had a reputation for being a dive. Hearing that, I was glad we were going to my place and not there. I could imagine it swarming with bedbugs or cockroaches or worse. I shuddered at the thought.

I pulled into the large driveway at the three-level Victorian and killed the engine.

“Holy fuck. This place is huge. You live here?”

I chuckled. “Not alone. The owners renovated each floor to their own separate apartments. There are three of us who rent. I’m up top.”

“Oh. Wow. It’s still pretty cool.”

We got out, and I led CJ around to the stairs that went to my upper level. We climbed in silence, and I let us in. Flicking the lights on, I aimed

for the kitchen and called over my shoulder, “Can I get you a drink? I have more beer.”

“Sure. This place is really nice.”

“It’s all right. Nothing special.”

I found two bottles on the bottom shelf of the fridge and popped the caps before finding CJ in the living room. He spun in place, taking it all in while his backpack sat on the floor by his feet.

I handed him a beer and earned a smile.

“Thanks.”

As he sipped his new drink, I noted his incessant shuffling between feet and the way his one hand remained jammed deep in his pocket. All eye contact had ceased.

He was nervous, and for the first time, I considered whether or not he’d ever done anything like this before. He’d seemed confident enough at the bar, but alone in my apartment, there was an edge of panic in his body language.

“You all right?”

He was pounding back his drink at a fantastic rate but paused long enough to nod.

Lies.

I approached and removed the bottle from his tight fist, earning a frown. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t want you so shit-faced you’re falling over.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re a lightweight. You had three at the bar already. Your eyes are glassy.” I set his bottle aside and snagged his waist, drawing him against my body and peering down into his face. There was anticipation mixed with his nerves. “You sure you want this, kid?”

“Yeah.” He scowled like I’d insulted him.

“Good. Me too. One more question.”

He waited.

“Have you done this before?”

His body stiffened, and anger simmered to the surface. Before he could retort, I cut him off by threading both of my hands through his silky blond hair and yanking his head back, bringing his face to mine as I breathed across his parted lips.

“There is nothing wrong with being a virgin, so don’t get instantly defensive on me. I only ask so I don’t wind up hurting you and getting too rough right away. So answer the fucking question without getting pissy.”

His breathing hitched, and he licked his lips as his gaze dipped to my mouth. “Fine. I’m a fucking virgin, okay. Happy? But I still know what I want. I’m not afraid of a little pain. I wanna be fucked. Can you do that?”

“I can do that.”

I tipped my face closer, grazing my lips over his. His beer-tinted breath puffed over mine in small bursts. Taking control, I walked him backward until his back hit the wall. Then I crowded him, pressing my bigger body to his, discovering his steely erection straining his pants. I rode it, grinding our lower halves together a few times before speaking. The soft gasps escaping his mouth were all the reward I needed. His cheeks pinked and fingers tightened on my sides.

“I’m gonna blow your fucking mind. You’ll be glad you picked an older guy to fuck around with. I can teach you a lot, kid.”

I ground harder, giving his cock more friction until his eyes fluttered closed and he groaned. “Fuck. Oh my God, that’s amazing.”

I chuckled. “I haven’t even started.”

For a second, I questioned if he’d done *anything* with *anyone* before but thought it better I leave some of his pride intact. Too many questions might frighten him off.

With his hair threaded around my fingers, I tipped his head back until the tendons in his neck strained and he gasped. The bare stretch of his neck called to me. The small rise of his Adam’s apple. The whimpers spilling from those beautiful, full lips.

I dragged my tongue along the pale flesh of his neck and up to the curve of his jawbone, where I scraped my teeth and nipped my way to the corner of his mouth. Fanning my lips over his, I savored the moment a few beats longer before closing the distance and engulfing him in a long-overdue kiss, stealing his next breath. I plunged into his mouth, tasting him, sucking his tongue, and drawing more little noises of pleasure to the surface.

He tasted incredible. Under the hints of alcohol, there was a sweetness I couldn’t place, a tang. *Something*. I kissed him harder and deeper, groaning at his flavor, unable to get enough, knowing I could easily get addicted to him if I didn’t come up for air.

He was dangerous, of that I was certain.

Breaking free from his mouth was nearly impossible. We both came apart, panting and aching for more, chests crushed together and bodies flushed with desire. I hissed when he rocked forward, connecting our lower halves again in a gentle motion like he was unsure about taking the lead but was desperate to have more.

“Bedroom.” My voice dropped an octave on the single word, and his pupils grew wide.

He nodded, his blond hair falling partly in his eyes with the gesture.

He stumbled over his feet in his haste to get down the hall. Before he could take in the scant furniture in the room, I lifted him and threw him onto my queen-sized bed, snagged an ankle, and flipped him to his back. He watched as I crawled over the top of him, hovering and staring down into his radiant, lust-filled eyes.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous.”

He took hold of my shirt and pulled me down, crushing our mouths together. Showing his growing bravery, he swept his tongue in my mouth, eagerly encouraging the same fire to build that had been present in the living room. He was less coordinated than the other men I’d been with, like he was possibly new to it all—even kissing. The thought ignited my blood.

I lowered my body, feeling his smaller frame below me, pressing our erections together and making friction again. It brought those delicious whimpers out, and I chuckled into the kiss, breaking free of his mouth.

“So eager.”

“Want you to fuck me.”

“I will, sweetheart. Patience. Need to explore this beautiful body first.”

Kneeling on either side of his hips, I slipped my hands under his hoodie and the T-shirt underneath and pulled them over his head in one go. Bare-chested, pale and thinner than I’d expected, CJ blinked up at me, a hint of a blush on his cheeks. His chest was hairless. His hip bones protruded. His nipples were firm and pebbled. He was a treat to observe.

Not wanting him to feel embarrassed, I shucked my shirt as well, tossing it to the ground with his discarded clothes. I was broader, more muscled, and hairier than him. I was also noticeably older, but he didn’t seem to mind.

I moved down his body, trailing my fingers through the faint patch of hair below his navel until I reached the button on his pants. Not taking my

eyes off him, I flicked them open and shimmied them down his legs and off, leaving him in a tight pair of black boxer briefs. His arousal was not hidden.

His gaze skipped to the button on my pants, asking without words, and I nodded, removing mine as well.

Both of us in only underwear, I worked my way over his entire body, feathering kisses and lingering licks over his bare flesh, making him shiver and close his eyes. I mouthed his erection through the cotton of his briefs, pressing my lips tight around him as I gusted hot air through the fabric and moved over him.

"Oh fuck! Oh fuck! You'll make me come. Shit. Stop!" He grabbed two fistfuls of my hair and tugged me off, eyes wide and panic lacing his features.

I chuckled and unpeeled his hands. "Oh, to be nineteen again."

"Fuck off. Oh my God. Dude, seriously. Too intense."

Once his fingers weren't trying to make me bald, I licked his navel and kissed up his chest, paying careful attention to his budded nipples as I went, watching his response. He was so receptive, gasping and rocking his hips upward involuntarily.

"Jesus. You're going to kill me."

At his mouth again, I kissed him deeply, exploring as far and as much as I could, savoring his taste.

Again, our lower bodies ground together, except this time, CJ was too close to orgasm, and I feared he'd rut until he came. I lifted away from him and earned a growl of frustration.

"Relax. There is no rush."

I rolled us to our sides and hooked his top leg over mine, then I wet a finger as CJ watched.

"What are you doing?"

"Have you ever had anything in your ass?"

He opened his mouth and slammed it shut again without answering. I assumed no. I took him back into a kiss, whispering against his mouth, "Stay relaxed if you can." Then I slipped that finger down the back of his underwear, circling his tight entrance and making it slick. He gasped and tensed.

Applying pressure without entering, I toyed with him and kissed him until he vibrated in my arms, then I breached him with one finger—only to the first knuckle.

His mouth stopped moving on mine, and so I pulled back to watch him as I continued to move the single digit in and out of his hole. The front of his underwear was wet, his mouth was slack, and I didn't think the kid was going to be able to take much more.

"How close are you?"

"Nnguh… Need to come. Fuck, that's so good."

I removed my finger and rolled him to his back again. Before he could protest, I slipped down his body and mouthed the wet spot on his underwear as I peered up into his lust-drunk eyes.

"You can't… I won't be able to… Oh God." His head tipped back, and he pressed his hips off the bed, seeking more pressure.

Mouthing the fabric with purpose, I moved up to the band of his underwear. "CJ. I'm gonna make you come, but this ain't over, kiddo. This night is far from over."

"Please. Oh God. Yes."

I folded down the band of his underwear only enough to expose his swollen head, dripping and twitching in anticipation. I licked a circle around him, tasting his salty, bitter essence. Then I sucked the tip into my mouth, and he exploded on a cry. Thick jets of his release filled my mouth, and I peered up as I took all of it, admiring the blissed-out expression on his face as he let go, shouting into the room and shuddering with pleasure. All because I sucked the very tip of his dick.

When he settled, I released him and chuckled. "I didn't even get your underwear off. And I didn't even take you down my throat."

He covered his face and laughed. "Shut up, man. Fuck. Holy shit."

I licked his head again, and he hissed, dropping his hands back to the bed and peering down. "So sensitive."

"Yeah, for about five minutes, but you'll bounce back. Trust me. Can't wait to get my dick in that tight ass."

"Let me suck you. Please."

Studying his face, I grinned and left his underwear in place. "You done that before?"

He shook his head, his cheeks growing pink. "But I want to."

I shed my underwear and crawled back up his body until I knelt on either side of his chest, then I gave myself a few tugs right where he could watch. He licked his lips and cast his eyes once in my direction.

I leaned forward, holding my weight on one hand as I guided my steely length to his mouth. “Go ahead. Suck it, sweetheart. Let me see what you’ve got.”

He didn’t shy away. Almost eagerly, he lifted his head and dragged his tongue up my length, root to tip. The sight was out of this world. His big blue eyes stayed locked on mine, his lashes framing them. His swollen, full lips closed around me and then there was suction. Delicious, incredible suction.

He was an angel. A fucking god in my bed. I forced myself to watch him and not close my eyes with the sheer pleasure rocking me. I wanted to see myself slide into that pretty little mouth. Wanted to capture it all. This was a moment I wanted to relive a thousand times over.

He gagged once when I shoved myself in too far. His eyes watered, and he blinked the tears away, but he kept going, undeterred. He found a steady rhythm, hollowed his cheeks and sucked me with amateur skill, but it was perfect, and I didn’t care. My blood warmed. My skin tingled. And every glide over my thick cock brought me closer to the edge.

Before I came—not that I didn’t want to at that moment, but I wanted his ass more—I backed off, pulling from his glorious mouth and leaving a string of saliva dripping down his chin.

With a thumb, I wiped it away. “So fucking hot. My dick belongs in that mouth.”

“So let me make you come.”

“Not this time. I want in that virgin ass. Feel that tight stretch around me.”

His chest heaved with his anxious breathing, and he nodded. “Me too.”

I worked my way back down his body. He was hard again—of course. Nineteen, I reminded myself. His erection strained his underwear. It was time for them to go.

Wedging myself between his legs, I rested one of his feet on my shoulder and kissed along his calf as I watched his every reaction. I grabbed hold of the band on his underwear and drew them down slowly, admiring his beautiful cock as it was fully revealed. Perky and waiting for more attention.

Then my gaze slipped sideways when a dark patch of skin caught my eye. I froze, eyes glued to the large port-wine stain birthmark covering his

hip. The mark that was as large as my hand and as familiar as my own face in the mirror.

The earth stopped moving. Time stood still.

My stomach dropped. My insides turned to ice, and I couldn't move or breathe.

"It's just a birthmark. Fuck. I'm not some freak. Stop staring."

He slapped a hand down over the top of it as he tried to cover it up, but I still couldn't move or process what I was looking at. The information refused to compute.

It was a full minute of complete shutdown before the gears started turning again, and realization surfaced, slamming into me with more force than a tidal wave.

He wasn't from town.

He was nineteen.

"Why are you here?" I'd asked.

"Chasing ghosts, apparently."

CJ.

Fuck!

Creed Jackson.

I shot backward off the bed, fumbling with haste and nearly falling before I collided with the wall on the other side of the room. The horror of the situation rose all around me, surrounding me. Suffocating me.

"What the fuck?" CJ—*Creed*—sat up with a scowl and confusion on his face. "What the hell is going on?"

I covered my mouth, my eyes so wide they felt cold. "Creed?" I whispered through my fingers like it wasn't true, like I was dreaming and saying it out loud would make it not real. *It can't be real.* I'd wake up and this would all be a dream. "Creed. Not CJ. Your name is Creed. Creed Jackson. Jesus Christ. This isn't happening. Tell me that's not your name."

Creed flinched. "What the fuck?"

"Born September twenty-seventh, two thousand. Tell me that's not your birthday."

His eyes took in every corner of my face as his confusion deepened. His own terror took root as he came to the same realization as me.

"Dude, you're freaking me out. Stop saying that shit."

"Why are you in town?" I asked.

He hesitated like he was afraid to say. "I told you—"

“Chasing ghosts. What does that mean?”

“I’m… I’m looking for my dad. But his name is—”

“Rhyker Collins.”

Creed looked increasingly more uncomfortable. When he didn’t say anything, I continued.

“Guess what, kid? You found him.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Nine
Creed

“YOU’RE A FUCKING LIAR. Your name is Ryan. You *said* your name was Ryan!”

Even as the accusations fell from my mouth, I knew I was wrong. I knew this whole fucked-up night had just gone sideways. The man with his back pressed to the wall—the *naked* man—was my father. My fucking dad.

I physically felt the blood drain from my face as I knelt on the bed, replaying everything that had just occurred between us.

Ryan—no, Rhyker—no, *my dad*—grabbed his underwear off the ground and tugged them on so fast I thought he was going to fall over in his haste to cover himself.

He flew from the room before I could stop him. I didn’t know what to say. I’d just been naked with my dad. More than that. I’d sucked his dick. He’d sucked mine. He’d fucking let me come down his throat.

Hands trembling, I pulled my underwear up since they were still caught around my ankles and snapped the band on my wrist harder than I’d ever done before. My head was a hurricane, a typhoon, a vicious electrical storm spinning and racing and eating up all my abilities to process the situation properly.

Before I could begin to bring myself back under control, *he* came back in the room and shoved his wallet in my hands.

I stared at him for a second before sliding my eyes down to the card—the license—showing in the front sleeve. Rhyker James Collins. *Rhyker fucking Collins.*

“Why did you lie to me?” It was the only thing I could think to say.

“Because I never give my real name to a hookup. Same fucking reason you called yourself CJ, right?”

“No.” I handed him back his wallet and shied away from the fury in his eyes. “Everyone calls me CJ. Mom, Grandma, teachers, friends, Toby. Only Grandpa calls me Creed Jackson sometimes when he’s really pissed. Otherwise, even he calls me CJ. It’s never Creed.”

He stared at me, dumbfounded. “No one *ever* called you that when you lived here. Never. *Ever*. It was *always* Creed.”

He studied my face with such intent, such hostility, I couldn’t meet his eyes. My stomach sank as too many thoughts surfaced at once and cluttered my brain. I snapped the band faster, harder, closing my eyes against the assault, and waited for my world to implode.

He was going to kick me out. Send me away. Tell me to fuck off. Tell me what we’d done was wrong.

It was wrong! Holy fuck, it was all kinds of wrong!

Except, I couldn’t focus on that right now.

“Creed?”

His tone had softened a fraction, so I cracked my eyes, my lungs tight, my muscles aching from the tension stored inside them. He squatted down in front of the bed, eyes level with me, forehead creased, and face pale behind his thick beard.

“Jesus Christ, it’s really you, isn’t it.” It wasn’t a question so much as it was a shocking revelation he was still trying to make himself believe.

“I wanted to find you. I came here to find you. I…” I stared down at my almost naked body and shame swamped me. This wasn’t how our reunion was supposed to go. I folded my arms around my waist and curled in on myself. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know it was you. I’m so sorry.”

He stared at me. Eyes penetrating. Jaw tight. Lips pressed firmly together. Then he shook his head as if shaking away bad memories. “This didn’t just happen.” There was disbelief in his tone. “How the fuck did this happen?” The second statement came out with a sharper edge, and he was on his feet again. “I should have known. I should have fucking seen it. You looked familiar, but I didn’t know why. Fuck!”

He paced, tearing fingers through his thick mop of dark hair as he stole glances in my direction every now and again with a look of disbelief. The more agitated he became, the more my anxiety worsened. I made myself as small as I could and assaulted the band on my wrist, suddenly regretting my decision to leave home altogether because this man clearly hated me.

He stopped. Faced me. Scowled. Then paced some more.

I couldn’t take it. My emotions peaked, and I growled, fisting my hands so tight they hurt as I yelled, “Can you just fucking say something? Stop tearing a hole across the floor and talk to me, goddammit. I don’t know what to do here.”

He stopped again, looking momentarily startled by my outburst. His chest heaved with his quickened breaths as he examined me there on his bed. “Look.” The word was biting. “I’m *trying* to get past what we just did so I can absorb the fact that my son—*my son*—who I haven’t seen in ten years is sitting in my room. On my bed. Practically fucking naked. Jesus!” He ripped a hand through his hair again before waving it at me. “Can you please get dressed? Can *we* get dressed so I can sort out what the fuck to say next?”

I didn’t argue. I scrambled off the bed and put my clothes on as fast as humanly possible. He copied, picking his jeans off the floor and tugging them on with jerky movements.

Once he was dressed, he yanked the bedroom door open, smashing it against the opposite wall, and pointed to the hallway. “Out. Living room. I need to get away from… this.” He waved a hand at the rumpled bedding.

Feeling about half my age, and guilty like it was somehow my fault, I stumbled down the hallway and peered around his living room, unsure where to put myself.

He came up behind me, flew past, and aimed for the kitchen. When he returned, he was carrying two bottles of beer and handed me one, indicating for me to sit on the couch.

“So I guess now you know I wasn’t lying about my age,” I mumbled, sinking down onto the far cushion. I picked at the label on the bottle, refusing to meet his eyes as he leaned on the far wall instead of joining me.

Nothing. No response.

I swigged my drink. Waited. Drank more. Waited more. Finally, I glanced up. Rhyker—I really didn’t know what to call him—stared into middle space, mind far away, beer untouched in his hand.

“Dad?”

He flinched and met my gaze. Then he frowned. “I don’t think I want you to call me that just yet. It… Look…” He dropped his beer on the coffee table and moved to the couch, sitting and burying his face in his hands. “Creed, what happened in the bedroom—”

“Was a mistake. I know. We didn’t know.”

“We didn’t. It was a really big mistake. No one can know what happened, do you understand me?” He peeked out from behind his hands. “I’m serious. No one. I could go to jail. *You* could go to jail. That was wrong on so many levels, I can’t begin to wrap my head around it.”

“It’s no one’s business.”

“It was *wrong*, Creed. Do you understand that?”

I scowled. “I’m not an idiot.”

He rubbed a hand over his face and nodded. “I know you’re not. I’m sorry. We just… We need to bury it. Never talk about it again. Pretend it didn’t happen.”

“I get it.”

He blew out a breath, and the tension drained from his body. For the first time since discovering who each other was, he looked at me without anger. Really looked at me. Curiosity and awe shone through his eyes. “I can’t believe it’s you. Do you have any idea how long I’ve been looking for you?”

My heart calmed with his gentler tone, and I unclenched my tightly wound muscles. “You’re not exactly easy to find either.”

“I’ve never left the city. Your mom and grandparents always knew where I was.”

“But they were determined I didn’t know.”

“New Brunswick, huh?”

I nodded. “Saint John. We moved there when I was nine. I… I asked about you sometimes, but they wouldn’t tell me much.”

“I bet. Did they kick you out?”

“No. I ran away.”

His face turned contemplative. “Did they know you were gay?”

“No. I didn’t sense it would go over well. They kinda preached against it my whole life. I think I might know why now.”

“Yeah. They found out I was gay when you were nine. I’d hidden it for years. From everyone. You witnessed me and my boyfriend at the time making out. Then it blew up. When they figured everything out, they refused to let me near you. Took me to court, won full custody, and had me deemed an abusive parent because of it. While I fought to get you back, they disappeared.” He paused, studying me. “Did you not recognize me?”

I looked at him, truly looked at him for the first time, knowing he was my dad and searching for those lost threads buried in my mind. I took in his features. His thick beard. Dark eyes. Broad shoulders. Rugged, almost messy hairstyle that curled a bit with its length.

I tugged on those faded memories from my childhood and tried to fit this man into those scenes. He was there. I could see the similarities now.

The vague impression of the dad I'd carried for years in my mind and this man sitting on the couch. They were similar. Close to the same. Except, the man from my past wasn't disguised behind facial hair and age.

"Did you always have a beard?"

He scratched the growth on his face. "Actually, no. Started growing it a couple years ago. Hold on."

He bounced off the couch and rooted through a drawer in a curio cabinet in the corner. Once he found what he was looking for, he came back and sat down, placing a small stack of pictures on my lap.

"How about the guy in these pictures. Is he familiar? I'm afraid I'm not nearly as young and handsome anymore."

I picked up the top one. It was me at probably age eight or nine with a much younger version of my dad. Clean-shaven, more muscle bulk, hair cut way shorter and missing the subtle curls he had now. Smile bright. I was dressed in a soccer uniform, and Dad stood behind me, crouched down so we were on the same level, one hand on my shoulder.

It was him. *That* was the faceless man I'd been trying to picture for years. Had my vision been slightly more clear, more accessible in my muddled, chaotic mind, I might have known right away that the guy sitting beside me was my dad.

"You look different. But you didn't recognize me, either, did you?"

Peering up in anticipation, I studied him before returning my gaze to the photo, tracing my thumb over the nine-year-old version of me in the picture. I was a kid. Equally changed. My hair was almost shaved to the scalp, and I was tiny. Lanky. Way smaller than I'd realized. I had a baby face and none of the sharper angles that had developed as a teenager.

"To be fair. I wasn't exactly anticipating seeing my son at the bar. You look different too. Older. More mature. A very handsome young man now." Realizing what he'd said, he shifted his gaze to his beer and cleared his throat like the comment was inappropriate. "Your hair is much longer now, and it's lightened. We used to keep it really short. But I see it. The similarities. And I can't believe I missed it. Your eyes are the same. They were always this incredible blue color. Your lips…" He trailed off.

I touched my mouth, flashes of our shared kisses surfacing. The taste of his tongue deep in my mouth. His body crushing me to his bed. His—

Slamming *that* door closed, I nodded, flipping to another picture. They were all taken on a soccer field.

“I only vaguely remember playing soccer.”

“You loved it. Baseball too.”

“I didn’t do any of those things in New Brunswick.”

“No?”

I shook my head and studied a picture of me with a bunch of other kids. None of them were familiar, and it bothered me that my memories didn’t go back that far. Or at least not with enough clarity to pinpoint activities like these. My head was like that, though. Too active. Too out of control. Too agitated to stay focused and retain details and important information.

Like schoolwork.

I wondered if Rhyker—*Dad*—would be disappointed to know how stupid his kid turned out to be. How fucked in the head. I didn’t even have a high school diploma.

“So they ran away with me and didn’t tell you?”

“Yup. I tried to find you. Even hired a private investigator for a short time, but he had no luck. No real access to things that might have helped. Because I didn’t have custody, I didn’t have a leg to stand on with authorities. Not sure how good that guy was anyway, to be honest. I was desperate. Poor. Young. We assumed they’d taken you out of Ontario, but we didn’t have a clue where.” He paused, seeming to debate whether to go on. “Creed… Can I ask you something?”

I set the pictures aside and shifted sideways on the couch to face him better. Once he knew he had my attention, he continued.

“Did they take care of you? Your mom. Did she… pull her shit together? She was always so…” He sighed but didn’t finish the sentence.

I huffed a sad laugh and trailed my gaze over the entertainment unit across the room, unsure how to express how the last ten years of my life had been.

“She… She doesn’t give a shit about me. Not really. No one does. I’m nothing but a pain in their asses. The delinquent child who no one wants to deal with. I… bounced houses a lot. Mostly I lived with Grandma and Grandpa because Mom couldn’t handle me.”

When he didn’t respond, I chanced a peek at my dad, unsure what he’d think of those truths or if it was something he already knew. His face was all hard angles and tense muscles. When our eyes locked, he shook his head vehemently.

“You are not a delinquent child. How dare they call you that?”

I shrugged. “I would probably be in jail right now if it wasn’t for Toby. He’s the only person who ever gave a shit.”

“Who’s Toby?”

“A local cop. A friend. He pulled me off the street more times than I can count for fighting, alcohol possession, loitering, destruction of property, and just random shit I shouldn’t be doing. After a particularly bad night when I was sixteen, he offered to help me out so I wouldn’t end up in jail or some juvenile detention center. He took me to anger management classes and other ones with a county-appointed counselor who helped me with some of the head shit that bugs me all the time. Toby taught me how to box and release my anger on a punching bag instead of a person’s face, you know? So… He’s cool. I like him. He saved me.”

“A cop?”

“Yeah.”

Dad processed that for a minute. “Okay. First, I’m really glad this guy helped you out and gave you outlets. And I’m glad you listened to him.”

“You don’t think I’m just some dumb fucking kid like everyone else?”

“Never. Creed, you’ve struggled your whole life with a sensory processing disorder and ADHD. That stuff doesn’t go away. It might be more manageable as an adult, but it will always present challenges for you. Didn’t they try adjusting your meds if you were having so many problems? What about your EA? Didn’t you have one still in high school?”

“EA? What’s that? And what meds? What are you talking about?”

He flinched like he didn’t understand what I said. “What do you mean, what am I talking about?”

“I don’t take meds. Never have.”

“Yes, you did. From the time you were seven. You were diagnosed with a slew of things. A more severe form of ADHD primarily, but they also figured you suffered from a moderate sensory processing disorder or SPD. They had you on a few different meds by the time you were nine. They helped regulate your brain so you didn’t get overwhelmed by your environment and calm your head so you didn’t feel like you were spinning all the time. You always had educational assistance in school… Didn’t they… It wasn’t perfect but… Creed?”

His words came at me in a jumble. Spinning and spinning around my brain, exactly as he described. Like a tornado. A windstorm. Their meaning was clear, but it cranked up my anger the more he spoke—the more I

understood. By the time he finished talking, the inside of my head was shaken. The lights were too bright. Something buzzed in my ears at a decibel that hurt my teeth, and I cringed, drawing my shoulders up and fighting the urge to cover them.

I couldn't get my thoughts out. The words jumbled and mixed together. I was livid. Furious. Confused. Frustrated. Hurt. It piled higher and higher and higher until the weight crushed me and it was all I could do not to scream.

I snapped my band. Over and over. Hard enough to cause a biting pain in my wrist. It wasn't bringing me back as quickly as I wanted. It was supposed to work. It was supposed to ground me.

Jumping off the couch, I paced, snapped, paced, snapped. A growl rumbled in my chest, and I ground my teeth as my ears rang and my skin crawled. I squinted against the stinging in my eyes.

They… All this time… Meds?

Why?

How?

"Creed?"

My name, although spoken in a normal tone, hit me like a clap of thunder. Too loud. Too jarring. It was the tipping point. I spun on Rhyker who'd stood from the couch, and that growl that was stuck in my chest climbed up my throat and echoed through the room, bouncing off the walls.

"How can they… When I told them… I told them that… Fucking… Won't listen to me… I said it was…"

My skin burned, and adrenaline flooded my system.

Just say it, goddammit. Spit the fucking words out!

I needed an outlet. The band didn't work. Nothing worked. I was trapped. Like a volcano set to blow. Everything rumbled inside, hot and angry.

Don't harbor it. Expel all that anger. Hit the bag, CJ. Come on. Don't hold back. It's poison when it's stuck inside. It will only keep hurting until you let it go. Hit the bag. Hit the bag until you can talk.

I had no bag. Toby wasn't there to talk me down. Everything Dad said. Meds. Diagnoses. How come I'd never been told? Why did they leave me like this? Broken by my malfunctioning brain. They *knew* I was a mess. They *knew. THEY KNEW!*

I spun and let out a flurry of punches on the wall. Oblivious to the pain. Seeing only red. Feeling only the burning fire within. Lost in the storm.

Get it out, get it out, get it out.

One… Two… Three…

Hit the bag. Hit the bag. Hit the bag until you can talk.

There was no give like a punching bag. No mercy. My anger was hard and sharp. A crimson curtain blinding me from reason.

Over and over and over.

Get it out, get it out, get it out.

Then, big arms wrapped around me from behind and pulled me away from the wall so I couldn't make contact any longer. I struggled. Fought the hold. Arched my back and yelled until my voice broke. Noise. Just a piercing cry because the rest was locked inside. I couldn't voice it. I growled again. Thrashed again. Vibrated and squirmed and fought.

But those arms didn't let go. They held me tighter. Blanketed me in warmth. Soothed the stinging pain of lights and sound and incomprehensible chaos.

"Shh… Breathe. Breathe, Creed. Steady. Calm. Come on, kiddo. Focus. You'll hurt yourself doing that. Bring it down again. I know you can. I've got you. Let your head settle. Close your eyes and let it calm."

His words by my ear found their way into the shattered world inside my head. They demanded order where I had failed. They commanded the storm to settle. They pushed the hurt away. They soothed. They warmed. They were a comforting balm on my tormented soul.

They understood. *He* understood.

Arms. Words.

I closed my eyes and breathed. His masculine scent tickled my nose, and it wasn't too much. It was just right. His voice was just right. His touch was just right.

"That's it. Good job, kiddo. Calm. Breathe through it. I've got you. I've always got you."

I didn't know when or how we ended up on the floor, but I was seated, cradled back against his chest, wrapped in his protective arms. My back to his front, his raspy beard by my ear, urging me to calm. Encouraging me to listen. Bringing me back from the insanity.

Blindly, with my eyes squeezed shut, I found my rubber band and focused on it, letting the sting against my thin wrist pull me the rest of the

way back.

Eventually, my heart settled and found balance once again. The words—the ones previously too jumbled to voice—came out. No longer as muddled. No longer as disconnected or disjointed. They came out in order. In a rush.

"I don't remember taking meds. They… They never told me. School… was almost impossible. I told them… I… Every time I tried to tell them my head was mixed up, they just said I had to try harder. I didn't have help. Not an EA or whatever you called it. But I couldn't make my head work right… or stop. Toby… He's the only one who believed me. He…"

Snap, snap, snap…

"Grandpa said I faked it. He said I was just trying to cause trouble, but I wasn't… I really wasn't. He said I used it as an… excuse. It wasn't. It *wasn't*!" I yelled.

Another deep breath. Another. Another.

Snap, snap, snap…

Dad squeezed me tighter and stroked fingers over my scalp. I took comfort in Rhyker's—*Dad's*—who-the-fuck-ever's—arms around me. His heat, the steady thrum of his heart against my back, the scent of his larger body squeezed against my smaller frame—something earthy, manly. Like gasoline and leather, wind and rain, sunshine and starry nights. Ten years yearning for this type of connection from a parent. It was more than I expected. A thousand times better.

This was how it was supposed to be, I thought. How it was always supposed to be. I knew Dad would get it. I knew he'd listen and understand.

My body turned liquid under his soft caresses, and I absorbed them all.

"We'll get you to a doctor. Your old one is here in town. Maybe he has your file still. I believe you, Creed. I'm the one who fought for you to get help in the first place. You struggled back then. I knew you needed help."

His mouth was so close to my ear, the prickle of his beard dragged against my cheek. I shivered, and the connection between us shifted subtly. Maybe it was exhaustion. Maybe it was the pedestal I'd placed my father on for all those years he wasn't around. He'd always been perfect in my mind. Untouchable. Exactly everything I needed but was denied.

In that moment, everything felt different. It wasn't a father comforting a son anymore. It felt… more intimate somehow. A low burning started in my belly. It was faint, almost easily dismissed, but I felt it. This man. This

hero of mine. It was good. He was good. All his words and touches, I didn't want to lose them. Never. I wanted more. I craved his arms in a way I probably shouldn't. Wanted to turn around and curl up in his lap. Bury my face in his neck and breathe in his soothing essence. Be as close as possible. Let him engulf me. Hold me.

Have me.

Something happened. A twinge. A pulse.

That fire in my belly warmed.

The strength of his arms was a comforting weight. They caged me and kept me close. Safe. Settled. I noted where his hands rested against my body. The way his fingers grazed my scalp, massaging. A caress in a way. I felt the solidity of his chest against my back. Each beat of his heart.

Suddenly, without meaning to, I was back in that bedroom again. His hands were on bare flesh. His mouth roaming my sensitive skin. I was completely at his mercy as he… took care of me.

And what frightened me more was that the thought wasn't entirely unpleasant—although it should have been. Was I that starved for love that I took pleasure in those inappropriate actions we'd shared?

Those thoughts just proved how fucked up I really was.

I struggled out of his grasp—because it was the right thing to do—and he let me go. We stood and faced off, both of us looking increasingly more uncomfortable as time ticked by.

Had he felt it too? Could he…

No. Don't be stupid.

"I'm sorry," I said, waving my hand at the wall I'd attacked, feeling the throb in my knuckles for the first time. "You don't know how pissed that makes me. I failed out of school. Never graduated. Was gonna wind up in jail. And to find out they knew I had problems this whole time and didn't care? That the answers were right there and they refused to acknowledge them? That just pisses me off like I can't explain."

"They never did agree with it. Fought me tooth and nail when I wanted to take you to the doctor's."

"Well, fuck them. They—"

We were interrupted by my phone ringing from inside my backpack. Rhyker—*Dad*, or whatever—looked wary.

"Will that be them?"

“Doubtful. I’ve been gone a lot of days, and they haven’t contacted me yet. I told you they don’t care. Although, now I’m tempted to send them a ‘Go fuck yourself’ message. It’s probably Toby. I told him I’d check in every night, and I haven’t yet.”

I moved toward my bag, but Dad held me back, catching my arm and not letting go. The worry in his eyes was real. “He can’t know what happened. I don’t care if he’s your best friend in the whole world. Even though it was an accident and we didn’t know, *anyone* finding out would be very bad. Especially a cop.”

“I know.” There was a long pause when he didn’t release my arm. My phone continued to ring. “Dad, I won’t tell anyone. It was our mistake. You and me. No one will ever know.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Ten
Rhyker

I LISTENED TO CREED talk on the phone with his friend—his *cop* friend. Every so often, our eyes met, and a faint smile appeared at the corner of his mouth. Then it hit me fresh. This was my son. The boy I'd searched for and missed for years. A whole decade. He was all grown up. A young man.

In my mind, he was still that nine-year-old kid I'd last seen. No wonder I hadn't put it together at the bar. In many ways, he looked so different.

The years had not been kind to him. Well, that was inaccurate to a degree. Physically, he was a stunning young man. I'd have said gorgeous if the word didn't sit so uncomfortably. But his mental state was severely compromised if his recent outburst told me anything. Plus, he'd been assaulting that rubber band on his arm endlessly. Even as he spoke on the phone.

"I found him." *Snap.*.. *Snap.*.. *Snap.*.. "I was having dinner at a bar… No, I didn't blow it all on alcohol… I know… Yeah. He was there." *Snap.*.. *Snap.*.. *Snap.*.. "I'm at his house… No, I'm okay… Yeah, I'm sure. Okay. I'll call you tomorrow."

I checked the time and was shocked to realize it was after midnight. So much had happened since I'd gone to the bar earlier. The wave of emotions still rocked me off balance when I considered it all. Without putting thought to the incident in the bedroom—which I'd decided was going to be bleached from my mind permanently for my own sanity—I was still in a state of shock that Creed was here.

In my home.

In my life.

It didn't feel right sending him off into the night, nor was I certain it was appropriate to ask him to stay. I was conflicted. However, remembering he'd said he was renting a room in a ratty hotel made my stomach burn. Fresh anger at Madison and her parents resurfaced because they'd treated him so poorly he'd felt the urge to run away. Escape. To seek out a man he barely remembered.

But I couldn’t get drawn into that pit of anger just yet. Not now. Not at midnight with so many other issues on the table.

Creed hung up and faced me, uncertainty showing in his stance and the way he plucked his bracelet mercilessly. He needed guidance. He was just as lost as me, but I was the real grown-up here. Not the barely nineteen-year-old boy.

“All good?” I asked, nodding at his phone.

“Yeah. I didn’t tell him. He’s glad I found you, but he’s worried. Skeptical. I can tell. I told him everything was fine. It is, isn’t it?”

“Everything is fine,” I reassured him. “Look. I know we have a million things to talk about, ten years of catching up, but it’s late. I don’t have a spare bedroom, but you’re welcome to crash on my couch.”

His gaze shifted to the couch and back. “Thanks. My cash was running low, so I appreciate it. I wasn’t sure if you’d want me here.”

“We’ll sort everything out. Just not tonight. Let me find you some blankets. If you want a shower, please go ahead.”

“That’d be nice.”

There was an awkward pause, and Creed struggled to hold my gaze.

Leaving him in the living room, I went and found a spare pillow and some blankets before returning. He was going through his bag with a frown.

“I’ll leave these here.” I dropped the bedding on the couch. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Um… Any chance I can do laundry here tomorrow? I’ve gone through all my clean clothes.”

“No problem.”

I pivoted, ready to leave and head to my bedroom, but paused. “It’s good to see you again. I thought… Well, let’s just say, I’d given up hope.”

I left him alone and closed myself in my bedroom, collapsing against the door. My son was here. He was back. Creed. My boy. It was almost too surreal. I felt like I was dreaming. In ten years, I’d forgotten how to be a father and felt out of my league.

Looking at him, seeing and hearing how he’d grown up in all those absent years made a seed of sadness burn in my belly. I mourned the loss of what we could have had. Of what he’d been through. All those years we could have bonded, and I could have kept him away from that horrible pit inside his mind because I always understood and had faith in the doctors to know what was best for my boy.

I closed my eyes and pushed away the renewed anger at what had happened to me. *To him.* Except, when I opened them again, the first thing I saw was the rumpled bedding. All the memories of earlier in the evening came crashing back.

My stomach dropped, and a wave of nausea enveloped me.

What kind of father was I? How could I have let that happen? After years fighting against the bullshit accusations of abuse because Creed had accidentally witnessed an intimate moment between me and a boyfriend, I'd inadvertently done way, way worse. A million times worse. At least it felt that way in my head.

I hadn't forced his hand or known who he was at the time, but I still felt responsible. Like I should have had an inkling or registered a feeling inside that told me the truth. But I hadn't.

Christ, I'd done everything but actually fuck him—and I'd been about ten seconds from doing that.

The shower started in the bathroom, drawing me from my head for a split second until images of a naked Creed under the water assaulted my brain. Bare naked. Miles of pale skin I'd seen with my own eyes only an hour or so ago. Skin I'd touched. Tasted.

I squeezed my eyes closed and slapped a palm to my forehead over and over, trying to dislodge the image of all that smooth, warm flesh.

"What a fucking mess," I growled, pushing off the wall and crossing the room.

I righted the covers, ignoring the scent of sex in the air, stripped to my underwear, and turned off the light before crawling into bed.

"It was an accident. I didn't mean for that to happen." Saying it out loud didn't assuage the guilt. It compounded it. Made the actions more real. More vibrant. More horrific.

I punched my pillow and found a comfortable position as I listened to the shower run and did everything to think about work and my upcoming run to Winnipeg so I wouldn't revisit the recent past.

The shower cut out a few minutes later, and I heard shuffling in the bathroom. The door opened, and then nothing. I taxed my ears, listening. I assumed his soft pattering feet took him toward the living room and couch and that the carpeting dampened the noise.

But then, from just outside my door, closer than I expected, I heard, "Goodnight, Dad."

It was nothing more than a faint whisper, but it carried a note of pleading. A *please don't be mad* or maybe a *you're all I've got* to it. A definite thread of worry. My heart ached for the boy who'd been dragged through the mud for ten years at the hands of people who'd never really cared about him.

"Goodnight, kiddo," I said, loud enough he'd hear.

I didn't hear him retreat. I didn't hear him crawl onto his makeshift bed on my couch. I didn't hear if he made those same little noises in his sleep like when he was a child; a soft sigh followed by the smacking of lips as sleep dragged him under.

I didn't think of how his hair would fall into his eyes or how his lashes would fan out against his cheeks.

I didn't think of any of it. I refused.

I thought of horror movies and car crashes. I thought of changing the oil on my truck and fishing by the lake.

The quiet night surrounded me, testing my resolve. Taunting me. But I was too tired. Too emotionally drained. Sleep found me quickly, but unfortunately, my mind remained restless and the stuff I'd worked desperately to avoid thinking about surfaced in the form of dreams.

Radiant blue eyes. More stunning than the ocean, more clear than the sky. Brilliant. Unique. Extraordinary. They look up at me from under long dark lashes, so much depth, so much yearning and need bleeding from their core.

They beg.

They plead.

Lips like coral. Full, delicate, unblemished. They strain as they wrap around my cock. Glistening and wet with saliva as he watches me.

He's moving. Gliding over my length in delicious long pulls that tingle over my entire body.

Hair like silky feathers falls between my fingers as I guide him, controlling his movements, encouraging him to go deeper. I need him to take more of me into his glorious mouth.

He's so willing. So eager to please.

My pleasure mounts and grows beyond my ability to control. The seed of my impending orgasm blooms and aches.

“That’s it. Take me deeper, Creed. I’m gonna come so hard. Can you handle it, kiddo? Can you take it?”

He unlatches, leaving me screaming on the inside, right on the edge. A pulse of clear fluid drips from my tip. A string of drool connects us, and his smile is blinding and mischievous.

“Want to taste you, Dad. Want it all.”

Those lips wrap around me again, his tongue lapping and circling, and then his movements change. They are determined. Focused. He hollows his cheeks, and tiny tears form in his eyes as he forces me in as deep as he can go. The sensation is too much. I’m cresting the edge before I can stop myself.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling…

I woke with a gasp, clawing the blankets under me, confused when I could barely move. They were twisted around my legs, restraining me. A sheen of sweat coated my body. My cock throbbed and ached. *Dripped.* Ten seconds from spilling its load.

And the horror of my dream crashed into me with perfect clarity.

Launching from bed in a raw panic, I stumbled and fell to the floor, taking the twisted blankets with me. Once I untied myself, I took pains to vanquish the images from my mind, refusing to touch my aching cock and give it the release it begged for.

There was no fucking way I would allow myself to find pleasure in that dream. None. Not in a million years.

No. Not. Happening.

“Fuck. Fuck me. Oh fuck!”

I panted, swiped the sweat from my brow and tried to orient myself in the dark room. I *refused* to acknowledge I’d had a sex dream about my son.

But it was hardly a dream.

Those events *had* happened. I’d seen those eyes looking up at me from under long lashes as I’d plunged between those luscious lips only hours ago. Felt the pleasure they’d given me.

Had been as close then as I was now to bursting.

Growling, I shot off the floor and jerked open the drawers on my dresser, looking for pajama bottoms of some kind. Anything. I needed to get

away from these thoughts—this room—but I certainly couldn't strut around half-naked through my house knowing Creed slept on the couch.

What we'd done was bad enough. I certainly didn't need to relive it. Or think about it. Or expose myself to him and make him think I'd enjoyed it in any way and wanted more.

It was horrifying.

Utterly horrifying.

Once my temper and panic were under control, I moved silently through the house to the kitchen. There was no way in hell I was going back to sleep. No way I was jerking off to relieve tension.

My body could suffer. I'd punish it for making me see and relive those things in my dream.

I would make coffee and purge my mind. Tomorrow, we'd sort things out, figure out what Creed's plans were, and move forward. I didn't know if he intended to stay in town, return to the hotel—although I hoped not—or maybe head home.

But if he stayed with me, how would that work?

As I waited for my coffee to brew, I leaned on the counter and dropped my chin to my chest as I rubbed the tension out of my neck.

I didn't know what to do.

Did I encourage him to call home so people knew where he was? Did I tell him he couldn't stay with me? Was that selfish? My place wasn't big. He wouldn't have his own room. Did he want to stay?

I was on the road again in two days. Was that enough time to figure things out?

The coffee pot beeped, so I filled a mug and stayed leaning against the counter as I drank it. I thought of Creed and the way he'd reacted when I'd told him about all the diagnoses he'd been given as a kid. The fury and rage that grew from deep within him. His inability to express himself. His frustration.

It was so similar to when he was a boy. How could Madison have ignored it? Her parents? It was unnecessarily cruel. There were meds that could help him. Calm him. This Toby guy—this cop—he'd at least tried. Thank fucking God. But that guy didn't know the extent I'd gone to for Creed as a kid.

It was so wrong. All of it.

"Dad?"

I jumped, my heart skipping right into my throat, my coffee spilling over my hand.

Creed stood in the doorway—in boxer briefs and nothing more—blinking at me through the darkness.

“Jesus, kiddo, you scared the shit out of me.”

“Sorry. What are you doing awake? It’s like four in the morning.”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

Dreamed of you sucking me off and needed to escape my bedroom for a while.

“Me either. Is there enough for me?” He gestured to the coffee pot.

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Here, let me.”

I left my mug on the counter and pulled a clean one from the cupboard, filling it to the top with the steaming brew. I glanced over my shoulder and focused steadily on Creed’s face and *not* his half-naked body in my kitchen. “Cream and sugar?”

He shook his head. “No. Grandma never let me put sugar in my coffee. Actually, she didn’t like me drinking coffee at all. Told me it made me hyper or some shit. But I did. I like it. Just milk is good.”

I found the half-empty jug in the fridge and added a splash before handing it over. He took it carefully between his hands, his fingers brushing mine as I passed it off. I miraculously refrained from jerking away from the contact despite the shot of terror it induced because I *should not* be touching him. *Period.*

“Thank you.”

He sipped carefully, his lips puckering as he blew over the surface. I darted my gaze away when I realized I was staring and backed up to the other side of the room, putting as much distance between us as I could. Escaping. That fucking dream had messed me up. The whole previous night had messed me up.

“So, what’s the game plan with you? You came to town to find me. Here I am. Are you staying? If so, where? How long? Not in a shitty hotel, I hope.” *Not here, I hope.*

He cast his eyes down and stared into his mug, the steam rising and licking over his cheeks. “Not sure. I… I just wanted to get away. From them.” He squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head before continuing. “It was… bad. It was b-bad at home. A job… I wasn’t gonna find a job there. I guess… I was hoping… if I found you, I could stay, but…” He

grimaced and peered over his shoulder into the small living room and the mountain of blankets on the couch.

But my place was small, and he hadn't thought of that.

Fuck.

"I'm not kicking you out, kiddo. You're welcome to stay for as long as you want. Until you get a job and a place or decide to move on. Whatever. I'm not like them. I promise you."

I'd find a way to move past our rocky reunion. The last thing I was going to do was not be there for my son when he'd reached out and come looking for me.

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all. Besides, I'm gonna be on the road again in two days. You can have the place to yourself if you want."

"Alone… I can't… On the road?"

I frowned as he struggled to make sentences. His fingers gripped tighter around his mug, and he looked frustrated with himself.

"On the road. Yeah. For work. I'm a trucker. Got a run taking me to Winnipeg in two days. I'll be gone for about a week."

"A week?"

"Yeah. That okay?"

I could see right away it wasn't.

Creed didn't answer. Frowning into a distant nothing, he shrugged as he rocked on his feet, looking more and more agitated. "I guess… That's… It's okay… Fine."

He didn't sound fine. *Shit.* What was I thinking? I hadn't seen the kid in ten years, and here I was readying to abandon him for a week right after we found each other. My actions weren't sitting right, and his reaction drew up all those memories of a young boy who'd never handled stress very well. A boy who would fall over his words. A boy whose mind took over and left him drowning and unable to gain control.

I studied him. That boy was still there.

All the signs of stress I knew to look for sat on the surface. The increased rate of his blinking and the way his gaze darted around, unable to remain stationary. His feet, shuffling, moving, jiggling. His teeth dug grooves into his lower lip. I needed to tread carefully; he was slipping, and I saw it plain as day just like I had all those years ago.

“Well, you could come with me, I guess. If you wanted.” *What are you doing?* “I can’t promise it won’t be utterly boring for you. We’d be on the road eight hours a day and crashing in hotel rooms at night. Up to you. I don’t mind the company.”

I held my breath, unsure if I wanted him to agree to come or turn me down.

“Might be a good time to… catch up.” The look in his eyes was hopeful. So fucking hopeful my heart ached and pulled to him.

“Yeah, we could catch up. That’d be nice, huh, kiddo?”

He nodded, his messy blond hair flopping over an eye. After blowing it from his face, I watched his shoulders inch back down, and the tension leach from his body. I’d done the right thing—I hoped.

“So you drive a truck? For a living? That’s… I didn’t… It’s not what I expected.”

I chuckled and took his mug to refill it along with mine. “I’ve done a bit of everything over the years. That’s what happens when you don’t get an education and have a baby at sixteen. I never went to college. Worked two and three jobs all the time to take care of you.

“I’ve done everything from working in a garage to bagging groceries to working the service desk at a bank downtown. Odd jobs, all of them. A couple of years ago, I got my trucking license and got hired with the Quaker company. It’s all right, if you don’t mind long hours on the road by yourself.”

“Sounds lonely.”

I shrugged. “Never had time for friends when you were little. After… I guess I didn’t know how to make them. I know people. We get along. Just not like that.”

“You don’t… I mean… You’re gay… A boyfriend or… I mean.” His face flushed and he stared down at his mug.

“No. That should have been obvious since… If I was in a relationship, I’d never…”

We both stopped talking and fidgeted. There was an abundance of awkwardness in the air between us again. Like neither of us could quite let go of the previous night. Or maybe it was just me and the stupid dream that still had my insides knotted. Either way, we’d wandered into a conversation I didn’t want to have.

“Did you mean it about the doctor?” Creed sputtered, and I said a silent prayer of gratitude for the change in conversation.

“Of course I did. I can call in the morning. Probably can’t get in for a week or so anyhow. I’ll make it happen.”

“Do you really think I’ll be better with medicine?”

“It helped a lot when you were little. It wasn’t perfect. Don’t expect miracles, but it should take the rough edge off. You’re better able to vocalize to the doctor now. That will help.”

His shoulders sagged, and his tension released. “That would be really good.”

We drank our coffees in silence, sharing the odd lingering look. The tension weighed heavier and heavier, and it was obvious we’d both been greatly affected by our earlier encounter.

I set my empty mug down and blew out a long exhale, rubbing my tired eyes, knowing I should be the adult and address it properly.

“Do we need to talk about it, Creed?”

He studied the floor and shook his head.

“If you feel uncomfortable staying here—”

“No!” His head whipped up, eyes filled with panic. “I don’t. It’s okay. *I’m* okay. It’s not a big deal. It’s just… you kinda know stuff about me I didn’t plan to share. I’m embarrassed.”

A laugh burst out of my chest from nowhere as I threaded fingers through my hair. “Believe me, kiddo. Me too.”

Noticing his mug was empty, I took it from his hands and placed it in the sink beside mine. “So enlighten me, how did you get from Saint John to here? That’s a hell of a distance.”

“Toby gave me money. I got a bus ticket to Ottawa and then hitched rides the rest of the way. But don’t tell Toby that part. I didn’t want to blow all the money he gave me on a train ticket, and there was no other way. It was expensive as hell. I knew I’d need food and somewhere to sleep eventually, so…”

“Do you know how dangerous that is?”

Creed shrugged and wrapped his arms around his torso, leaning against the far wall in the kitchen. “I know. Believe me, Toby read me the riot act about it. But you’re a trucker. They are mostly pretty nice and don’t mind the company. Have you never picked up a hitchhiker?”

“Never.”

More silence. God, it was awkward.

“Look, why don’t we start some laundry for you and when it’s done, we can go grab breakfast. There are all kinds of diners open this early. In the meantime, tell me about this Toby guy. He sounds like a good friend.”

Creed followed me into the living room and collected his ratty backpack. In the laundry room, we got the machine going with all his clothes, and I found him a T-shirt of mine to put on while we waited since his almost nakedness was bothering me more than I was willing to admit.

Creed wrapped a blanket around his shoulders as he sat on the couch, and I joined him, sitting as far away as I could while he talked.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eleven
Creed

THE OVERLY LARGE T-shirt he'd given me to wear smelled like him, and I dipped my chin, inhaling, wishing I could draw the collar up over my nose without it being weird. He sat as far away from me on the couch as he could get. Dark eyes watched my every move as he waited for me to talk.

"Toby's a good guy. Not all cops are. Most of them were assholes to me. They couldn't understand why he was so insistent on helping me. At first, we just met for coffee or lunch a few times a week and talked. I told him about Mom and Grandma and Grandpa and gave him the gist of my life at home. He listened. Never judged. I tried to explain about my head being a mess and the bullshit at school because my teachers hated me and thought I was disruptive. I was suspended a lot for fighting or acting out. I don't know… Toby just seems to understand me. Or he tries to, which is more than anybody has done with me to date. He never gets mad. When I'm feeling agitated or low, he makes me laugh. He tells these stupid jokes. Like really dumb ones no one ever laughs at. But because they're so dumb, I can't help it."

"Like you told me at the bar?"

"Yeah. Those were his. Default, I guess. He taught me a lot about handling myself when things feel unstable. He knows it's hard for me to get my words out when my head gets all mixed up. He doesn't push. He waits. He knows how to bring me back down."

I drew my knees up and wrapped Dad's T-shirt over the top of them, hugging my legs tight, encasing myself inside its big size. With my chin on my knees, I glanced at Dad. His forehead was creased, and his lips were pulled tight.

"What?" I asked.

"Was he… Did this Toby guy want something else from you? Was that why he was so nice?"

It took me a second to understand his train of thought, then I laughed. "No. God no. He's not like that. Toby is straight. He has a girlfriend.

Fiancée, actually. They've been dating a few years. She hates me, but that's beside the point. He's just an honest-to-goodness decent person. He encouraged me to take this anger management course. I didn't want to at first, so he said he'd go with me if I tried. That led to other classes. When I got kicked out of school for good, he helped me register to get my GED online. But it was too hard. I can't focus well, and I get overwhelmed. We worked together on it. He sat with me many nights, talking me through the exercises, explaining them so I understood."

"Did you finish?"

"No. I was getting there. It was taking so long I was getting discouraged. Then I told him I was leaving."

"Did something happen to set you off?"

I shrugged. "Mom and I had it out again. Same shit different day. It's been building up and making me more upset recently. Mom has a new boyfriend who's a dick and let's just say we don't get along. Grandpa kept threatening to kick me out because he says I'm a waste of space and too stupid to work. Says no one will ever want to hire me. I had enough.

"Toby wanted me to stay and finish my diploma. He said he'd help me get a job and move out, but I couldn't be there another minute. I… wanted to live with him, but his girlfriend wouldn't have liked that, and besides, I don't think Toby thought it was appropriate."

"But he gave you money."

"Yeah. He knew I was going regardless. He knew he couldn't talk me out of it. He didn't want me hitching rides or to wind up on the street. So he helped out—"

The washing machine beeped, startling me and bringing the conversation to an abrupt end. Dad flew off the couch and headed down the hall to flip it to the dryer while I stayed behind.

I buried my face in my knees, letting the soft cotton of his T-shirt brush my nose. It felt wrong and yet comforting all at the same time. I wanted to be back in the security of his arms where it felt safe and relaxing. Where I was surrounded by him in every way possible.

He wasn't in the room to see it, so I took a moment to enjoy the lingering scent of him on the shirt. I closed my eyes and pretended I was rubbing my nose along his neck and inhaling him.

When he returned, we chatted about his work and upcoming run to Winnipeg while the dryer ran. Once it stopped, Dad announced he was

going to hop in a shower before we went out for breakfast. When he disappeared into the bathroom, I wandered to the small laundry room and collected my clean clothes.

There, in relative privacy at the other side of the house, I stripped from my underwear and pulled on a clean pair. Reluctantly, I removed his T-shirt and tugged on jeans and my own shirt. Instead of leaving his T-shirt in the laundry basket, I hesitated before folding it and adding it to my clothes with every intent of sleeping in it tonight—after he went to his room and didn't see me pull it on.

The diner was not busy at just after six in the morning. There were a few men sitting on stools at the counter, each with their own version of plaid fleece jackets. *Weird*. They each wore winter hats and were bent over steaming mugs of java with plates of eggs and bacon half-eaten in front of them.

The guy on the end turned when the bells over the door chimed, and he greeted Dad with a beaming smile.

"Rhyker. You on the road this morning? Thought you just got back."

"Nah. Not for two more days. Just getting an early start today and thought I'd come for some breakfast. Is there some unwritten law that says I can only dine before a long haul?"

A woman's voice called from somewhere in the back. "Absolutely not, sweetheart. You know I love seeing your pretty face in here any day of the week. Be out in a second."

I peered up at Dad before scanning the handful of men who were now swiveled around on their stools watching us, amused for some reason.

A man with crisscrossed pieces of duct tape on the elbow of his jacket and a thick graying beard eyed me suspiciously before nodding in my direction. "Reeling them in kinda young, old-timer. Who's the lad?"

Dad chuckled and wrapped an arm around my shoulder, tugging me against his side. "This here's Creed. Creed, this is Stan, Porky, and Nelson. Creed's my son, so be nice and curb your filthy minds."

I shook their hands and found a tiny smile for each of them.

"Son? Jesus. No fucking way. You ain't old enough to have a son his age."

"Believe it. And if you don't mind, we're going to escape to a private table so we can catch up. It's been a lot of years."

A woman in an apron with a mess of silver and black hair pulled back in a bun came from the back kitchen. I assumed it was the same one who'd called out earlier. She grinned at us as she pulled a fresh pot of coffee from a burner. "Morning, Rhyker. Looking fine as usual." She winked. "Coffee?"

"Absolutely. Two, if you don't mind. And menus, please."

"Anywhere you'd like, sweetie. I'll follow."

Without removing his arm from my shoulder, Dad guided me to the other end of the diner. I glanced back and caught the flirty waitress eyeing Dad's ass. When she saw me watching, she shrugged and went back to filling mugs of coffee. Dad stopped at a booth in the farthest corner from the door and encouraged me to sit on one side while he sat across from me. His seat faced the restaurant, mine faced the window and the view of the quiet street. The shops across the way weren't open yet, and traffic was light at this early hour.

Dad's gaze was stuck somewhere over my shoulder, so I turned and followed it.

"Friends of yours?" I asked.

"Not friends, exactly. Fellow truckers."

"Oh. You work with them?"

"Nah. Porky and Nelson run pigs, and Stan works for a shipping company out of Mississauga. We cross paths frequently since he's out this way a fair bit."

"Pigs? As in they drive live pigs around?"

"Yup. To the slaughterhouse."

"Gross."

Dad chuckled as the waitress came over with our coffees, menus, and a small bowl of creams and sugars. Dad thumbed through the little creamer cups in the bowl before lifting a brow at the older woman.

"Any two percent, Milly? The kid prefers milk over creamer."

The kid. For some reason, Dad calling me that bruised my ego. Especially when he spoke to this overly forward woman I'd decided I didn't like. Besides, I didn't want him thinking about me like I was some young brat. Some child. I wasn't. I mean, I was. I was *his* kid, but still.

Milly sized me up and smiled. "I sure do. You gonna introduce me, Rhyker?"

"Milly, my long-lost son, Creed. Creed, this here is Milly, and we love Milly and treat her right because she feeds us well and brings us endless

coffee for a reasonable price.”

“Bet your pretty bottom I do. No one is gonna keep you full and satisfied like Milly. You remember that when you’re out there hunting down a man, gorgeous. Milly would take good care of you. Just say the word.”

“You’ll convert me yet, darlin’,” Dad drawled with a look I never wanted to see again on his face. Especially when his comment set Milly off into giggles she was definitely too old to pull off.

Then her attention turned to me. “So. Your son. And here you’ve told me all these years sex with a woman doesn’t appeal to you.”

Kill me now.

“Mom ruined him. She’s a whore. It was to be expected. It’s no wonder his compass aims for dick now.”

“Creed!” Dad snapped.

“What? She is, and it does.”

Milly chuckled. “Oh, I like him. He’s feisty, like you, Rhyker. And quite a looker. If I was thirty years younger.” Then she winked at me, and I gagged.

“I’m gay, too. Very gay. All gay. Nothing but penis for me, thank you very much. Can we order now? This is humiliating.”

Milly and Dad laughed as my cheeks warmed.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Creed. I heard Rhyker here had a son. We all thought you was long gone. But here you are. And as gay as they come apparently, just like your daddy here. I’m Milly Morganson, and this here is my diner. Been running her since I was probably your age.”

She held her hand out to shake, and I obliged, noticing how leathery and weathered her skin was and how her veins popped. She had a lot of freckles too. And wrinkles.

“Nice to meet you,” I mumbled, wishing we could start this whole conversation again.

Milly found me a few mini containers of milk in her front apron and set them beside my steaming mug of coffee before pulling a notepad from another pocket.

“What can I get for ya’ll this morning?”

“Give me the hungry man,” Dad said without looking at the menu.

“Um… Same, I guess.”

“Like father, like son. Adorable. Won’t be too long, boys.”

She collected our menus and strutted away. Actually strutted which was… disturbing.

I fixed my coffee as I considered something.

“Dad?”

He winced but didn’t ask me not to call him that again, so I didn’t correct myself. He nodded for me to continue as he sipped from his mug.

“What about the guys at the bar? What are you going to tell them? They know you. You go there often, don’t you? They… saw us together. You know, like that.” I picked at a scratch in the laminate surface on the table and chanced a quick peek at Dad.

He didn’t say anything for a long time. More than once, his eyes flitted around the diner, and his jaw muscles tightened.

“Let me sort that out. No one saw anything… outrageous, I don’t think. We were *relatively* contained at the bar. I’ll explain it away somehow. We figured out who each other was long before we got back to my apartment, and *nothing* happened.”

The heavy weight of his stare dared me to argue.

“Nothing happened,” I agreed.

Except, everything happened! And my brain is stuck on a loop, replaying it over and over and over.

The fact that I’d run my hand over his thigh while we’d sat at the bar. The fact that I’d felt him grow hard under my touch through his pants, that I’d rubbed him with purpose, with intent. Apparently, all of it meant nothing. It was an accident. We could explain it away, right? Hopefully, no one had noticed. Or if they had, maybe they wouldn’t remember. No one had seen us go back to his house. No one had witnessed our make-out session on his bed. Or the way he’d fed me his cock. Or brought me to orgasm as he licked the head of mine, making me see stars.

Fucking stop before you get a boner!

The trick was making myself forget because it was *all* I could think about.

How was I supposed to forget something that made me feel so amazing? Something that had blown my mind and launched me into orbit. Something I’d kill to feel again.

Except, maybe not with Dad… Maybe. I didn’t even know what I was thinking anymore.

“Do you… Have you… Is that common…” I couldn’t form the question and stirred in my seat as my brain itched with building anxiety and a curiosity I couldn’t temper. Things were rattling around too quickly for me to vocalize properly.

“What? Is what common?”

I squeezed my eyes shut and forced order into my head so I could ask. It was a weird question to ask the guy who was supposed to be my dad, but I couldn’t shake the impulse to know. After last night, I wanted to know everything.

“Do you always do that?”

“Do what?”

“Pick up guys at bars.”

He fell quiet and toyed with a napkin, shredding it into tiny little pieces. “Yes, but not normally here in town. I have rules.”

“Oh.”

“I prefer not seeing hookups again after. Too many complications.” He paused. “Do you?”

My eyes widened. “Do I? Oh! No! Um… No. Virgin, remember?” My cheeks burned as I wondered how accurate that statement was anymore.

Did a blowjob cancel that out? Was I officially not a virgin anymore?

Or did an accidental blowjob given by a parent who’d barely got his mouth around my tip not count?

This was so fucked up.

“Creed—”

“Let’s not talk about it anymore.”

We found neutral ground again, both of us desperate to change the subject. As many times as we tried to forget our encounter, the whole thing kept finding its way to the front again.

We talked about the weather. We talked about sports. We chatted about the random highlights from the recent news. I told stupid jokes because, holy fuck, how did a person move past this big-ass elephant in the room named *You Almost Fucked Your Dad?* Especially when there was a second elephant sitting behind the first called *And I Can’t Stop Popping Wood Every Time I Remember It*.

Eventually, Dad drifted into storytelling mode and told me about things we’d done together when I was little. It was neutral ground. Safe. Some of

the tales drew up fuzzy memories, but mostly, I didn't remember that far back in my life.

The whole time we talked, I struggled to stay focused. My thoughts ran a mile a minute, insistently circling back to the previous night over and over again. It was the first sexual experience I'd ever had in my life. I wanted to revel in it, relive it over and over, but then, the horrific reality returned, and my cheeks burned.

Our food's arrival saved us. We ate in awkward silence for a while. My knee bounced under the table, and I drummed my fingers on the laminate tabletop with one hand as I picked at my last piece of bacon with the other.

"You're antsy. What's up?" Dad's left brow sat higher than the right as he waited for me to answer.

I shrugged and stuffed the whole remaining piece into my mouth, crushing it to bits with my molars, and swallowing before following it up with a large swig of coffee. It wasn't like I could share my inner thoughts. They were so far from appropriate, I shouldn't even be thinking about them.

Yeah, Dad, it's nothing. I was just reliving the sheer bliss of your mouth on me. Remember how I came down your throat? Kinda want to do it again. Thoughts?

Fuck, my dick was growing hard. I shook my head and squirmed again, bouncing my knee faster.

"Creed?"

He pressed a hand down on the tabletop, stopping it from jiggling. I stilled my knee. Heat flooded my face, and I couldn't meet his eyes. My heart thrashed, and I looked around the diner, scrambling for a distraction. Something. Anything.

Where was stupid flirty Milly when you needed her?

"Why did the pig go into the kitchen?" I didn't let him think about an answer before I blurted, "Because he felt like bacon. What do you call a pig thief? A ham-burglar. What's green and smells like bacon?"

"Please stop."

"Kermit the Frog's finger."

Dad winced. "These are the worst jokes on the planet. How the hell old is this Toby guy? These are worse than the jokes my great-grandfather used to tell me when I was four or five, and those were terrible."

I grinned, the panic subsiding somewhat. "Toby's like thirty-something. I don't know. I told you they were stupid. But they help me stop the

spinning sometimes.”

And my head was a level four tornado at the moment. I shrugged and stole the last piece of bacon off my dad’s plate. He looked like he was going to argue but ended up chuckling and shaking his head instead.

He pushed his plate away and drained the last mouthful of his coffee.

“You get enough to eat?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“I was thinking I’d take you into my work. I need to do a few things, but it won’t take too long.”

“Cool.”

It was barely seven thirty when we pulled into the parking lot of Dad’s work. The Quaker factory was huge, and there was a sweet smell that lingered in the air, like cookies or some other baked good. I inhaled, and Dad chuckled. Even full from breakfast, my stomach growled.

“Wow, does your truck smell this good too when it’s full of stuff?”

Dad punched a keypad then held a metal door open for me. “It can. Perks of the job.”

“Better than shipping pigs.”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely.”

We wandered down a bare concrete hallway and through metal double doors near the end that entered into a gigantic open room that looked like a shipping dock. There were at least a half a dozen trucks lined up with their back ends fitted into individually divided areas while men driving forklifts moved large containers up ramps and inside them.

There was commotion everywhere. The noise level was intense. Beeping from forklifts backing up, machinery grinding and clattering, men yelling, their voices echoing in the large room. My shoulders moved to my ears of their own accord, and I squinted against the assault as I looked around.

It was a lot to process. Lots of action and people moving around the room. It came at me from all sides: light, sound, and the scent of sweetness was thicker in the air. I hadn’t had a warning or time to prepare. Already slightly on edge from earlier, the unexpected sensory overload tipped me into a wild spin.

Someone touched my arm, and I jumped, jerking away as the volume in the room elevated and elevated and elevated until it screamed so loud in my ears I couldn’t take it anymore.

I couldn’t think. Or move.

My heart hammered. My teeth ached. I fisted my hands, and my skin crawled.

“Creed?”

It was Dad who’d touched me. Dad who’d grabbed my arm.

I searched his face, unable to express how uncomfortable I was. My words wouldn’t come out.

He must have read something on my face. In the next instant, I was folded in his arms, one ear pressed to his chest as his hand covered my exposed ear. I squeezed my eyes closed as his warmth and comforting touch settled something in me.

When he spoke, the words rumbled in his chest. “I’ve got you, kiddo. I didn’t think. I’m sorry. Come on.”

He knew. He knew without me having to say a thing.

He didn’t release me as he dragged me a short distance to another door. We went through, and when it slammed behind us, the noise level was cut in half. Dad kept me crushed against his chest as he guided me down the hallway farther to another door. We entered.

It was an office. Once that door was closed, he let me go. The assault was at a level I could handle. He sat me in a chair and squatted to look me in the eye.

Both his hands rested on my upper arms, stroking gently up and down. The touch was grounding. The chaos, the storm retreated.

“You all right?”

I didn’t want to admit weakness despite him witnessing it all, so I shrugged. “Yeah. It was… nothing. I’m fine.”

“You’re pale.”

“I’m fine.” It came out with an edge, and he stopped questioning me.

He stood, his hands leaving my arms as he stepped back. For a minute, I mourned the loss of his touch, needing it for a few more minutes as the ground beneath my feet solidified. He studied me, assessing my honesty, my state of being, and I knew he saw the lie. Instead of calling me out, he gestured to the door.

“I’m gonna go touch base with my boss and check a few things. You okay here for a bit?”

“Sure. I said I’m fine.” Nothing like feeling like an idiot.

“I won’t be long.”

He disappeared through the door, and I was alone.

I didn't want to think about how easily Dad had registered my turmoil and how quickly he'd responded without question. I didn't want to examine the way his arms had felt around me, how they'd put me back together again, strong and soothing.

I especially didn't want to know why I yearned to be back in them with a need so powerful I couldn't explain it.

I looked around, desperate for a distraction, but the room was uninteresting. Nothing more than an ordinary office. A metal desk sat along the back of the room with a large corkboard behind it which occupied most of the wall space. It was filled with so many papers they overlapped, the older ones curling at their edges, torn and faded. There were two filing cabinets in the corner and a big water dispenser with the little cone-shaped paper cups sitting on top. A ratty, threadbare couch in a yellow-brown color sat near the door, and a table beside it contained magazines. *National Geographic*, *Time*, *Reader's Digest*. Nothing interesting.

I sat on the only chair—a metal-framed thing with a vinyl seat cover that was torn and spilling cotton fluff. It was off to the side of the door. Stacked boxes sat beside it in the corner, and on top of them was a coffee mug someone had long ago forgotten.

The hum from the main shipping room wasn't loud from here, so I was able to think more clearly. I rubbed my arms through my hoodie as I bounced my knees. My brain hummed and jumped around. There had been a lot less order and predictability since I'd left home. It messed with me more than I liked. I hated being weak like this and for that weakness to show in front of people.

While I waited for Dad to return, I pulled out my phone and shot a text off to Toby. It was early, but if he was working today, he would be up.

CJ: Dad drives truck. m gtg on the road with him 4 a wk. r gtg 2 Winnipeg I guess.

Unsure if I'd get a reply, I opened my Facebook and scrolled through my feed to distract myself while I waited in the empty office.

Less than a minute later, my phone rang.

Toby.

"Hello?"

"What do you mean you're going on the road?"

"He drives a truck."

“You said that. I’m just not sure how I feel about it. And to Winnipeg?”

“Toby, he’s my dad.”

“I know, but how well do you know this guy? You can’t just up and run off with him. It’s been ten years since you’ve seen each other, CJ. Did he tell you why he disappeared from your life? Have you talked about it at all?”

“We’ve talked lots. Actually, Mom and my grandparents ran away with me. They basically kidnapped me. He didn’t know where I was and had been searching for me for years.”

Silence.

I could hear Toby breathing on the other line and farther in the distance, water running. “They took you?”

“Yeah. He said there was a custody battle. They accused him of abuse, and he lost all rights to me—”

“Jesus, CJ. Abuse?”

“No, listen to me. I guess I witnessed him making out with his boyfriend or something way back then. He’s gay. Like me, Toby. They went nuts because he was gay, because I saw him making out with another guy. Not like I haven’t seen worse things from Mom. Anyhow, the judge wasn’t any better. Some homophobic twat. They were granted full custody, and Dad had to take classes and jump through hoops. He fought for me. He did everything the courts asked. When he was supposed to gain back rights, they had already taken me and run off.”

More swelling silence.

“How do you know he’s telling the truth?”

“I just do. Plus…” My thoughts jumbled, and I squeezed my eyes closed to force order again. “Plus, he said I was diagnosed with ADHD and something else as a kid. A sensory processing something. I was medicated back then. Mom and Grandma and Grandpa didn’t agree with the doctors. Toby, they’ve let me suffer like this for years, and they knew I had stuff wrong with me. They knew! They never gave me meds or took me to the doctor. I didn’t know any of this until now. They took me away from him. They stole me. They didn’t care that I was a fucking wreck. That’s abuse, Toby. *That* is abuse.”

My hands shook.

“Hey, hey. Calm down. I hear you. Don’t get yourself in a knot.”

“Do you believe me? Him? You have to believe me. You see, he’s not lying. I know he’s not. It makes too much sense. All of it.”

My insides trembled.

“You know I just worry about you. To me, this guy is an unknown variable, and your safety is my number one priority. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“He won’t hurt me.”

“I don’t necessarily mean physically. Emotional hurt can be just as bad, CJ. I don’t want you getting your hopes up.”

“He won’t hurt me,” I said again, reiterating my point, grinding my teeth. Because I felt it deep in my bones and knew it was the truth.

“Okay. Will you stay in touch? Just for a little while, so I know this is panning out. After, when you’re settled, I won’t interfere with your life if you want to stay out there with him.”

“So what, you’re friend-dumping me now?”

Toby chuckled. “You’ll always have me if you need me, okay?”

The knot in my chest loosened a degree, and I slumped back in the uncomfortable chair. “Thanks.”

There was another long pause before I randomly blurted, “We went out for bacon and eggs this morning. He took me to this diner where there were these other truckers. Two of them transport pigs to slaughterhouses. Isn’t that disgusting? It’s all I could think about while I crunched down like six pieces of bacon.”

Toby chuckled. “Oh yeah, what’s green and smells like bacon?”

I snorted. “See, Dad didn’t think that was funny. I keep working the jokes on him, and he just shakes his head and tells me they’re terrible.”

“They are terrible, buddy. I don’t know a single decent joke. They’re all shit.”

“I know. Believe me, I’ve heard them all.”

“Not all. Why don’t eggs tell jokes?”

“Because they crack each other up.”

“Damn, I’ve used that one before.” We laughed, and my tension bled away some more. “How do you get a squirrel to like you?”

“Act like a nut. You’re drying up, old man.”

“Hang on. Um… Why couldn’t the bicycle stand up by itself?”

I chuckled and shook my head, grinning. “No clue.”

“Because it was two tired.”

My smile couldn’t be contained. “You’re awesome.”

“Nah, you are. Keep in touch. I worry about you.”

“I will. I promise.” We were about to hang up when I called, “Wait, Toby?”

“Yeah?”

“Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Olive.”

“Olive who?”

“Olive you.”

Toby chuckled softly. “Olive you too, buddy. Go enjoy your time with your dad.”

We hung up, and I stared at my phone. So much of me wanted to talk to Toby about what had happened last night, but I knew I couldn’t.

Despite him being a cop and despite him being significantly older than me, he was my best and only friend. He’d saved my life in a way. For the past three years, I’d shared everything with him. He was the first person I’d come out to. Even though he was straight, he took the time to talk and explain all I wanted to know when it came to my sexuality—including the nitty-gritty like mechanics and the safety of using condoms. If he didn’t have answers, he found them. Toby never shied away or made me feel bad for being different or for the numerous struggles I endured on a daily basis. I trusted him like no one else.

Last night’s activities loomed over my head. My thoughts and feelings and desires weren’t appropriate. They were fucked up, but I couldn’t turn my brain off. I needed advice. I needed to work out the confusion in my head over what had happened and how I felt.

But I couldn’t talk to him. Toby couldn’t know.

The door opened a few minutes later, and Dad came through, frowning at some booklet of papers in his hand. He spared a quick glance in my direction before flipping the top page over and folding it underneath, scowling at the next.

“So, kiddo, looks like my schedule’s been bumped. We’re on the road at seven a.m. tomorrow morning.”

“Ouch.”

He chuckled, folded the stack of papers in half, and swatted me lightly on the top of the head. “Ouch is right. We should both make sure we get

some sleep tonight. Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twelve
Rhyker

SLEEP WAS A JOKE. I tossed and turned long after I went to bed for the night. Fear that I'd have *that* dream again kept me awake far longer than I wanted. Every hour that passed was one closer to dawn. I knew I had a long haul on the road the following day, but there was no convincing my brain to relax and sleep.

Eventually, sometime after three, I managed to find my way under. Thankfully, it was a dreamless sleep. The alarm woke me with a start at five thirty in the morning. I groaned as I rolled over and shut it off, knowing I hadn't slept enough. Eight hours on the road was going to kill me.

Groggy, I dragged myself upright and sat on the edge of the bed for a few minutes as the fog cleared. The house was quiet. It'd been quiet immediately after I'd gone to bed last night at ten, too. Creed had zonked out right away. A late-night trip to the bathroom around midnight had given me a glimpse of just how solidly he slept.

I collected a change of clothes from the dresser and headed to the bathroom, intent on showering. Before locking myself in, I paused. Because I didn't know how hard Creed was to wake, I decided to give him a nudge before cleaning up.

In the dark living room, I stared at him, asleep on the couch. One arm dangled off the edge, resting on the floor. The other was tucked under his head. He slept on his stomach, the covers having fallen during the night. They were pooled around his ankles, giving me a perfect view of his long, thin body.

He wore the same T-shirt I'd let him borrow the day before. It was hiked up and twisted around his midsection. His lower half was bare. He wore nothing more than a tight pair of striped underwear.

His long limbs were pale in the moonlight, his ass round and perky.

I darted my gaze away, growling angrily at myself.

"Fucking brilliant. Stare at his ass a little more, you fucking pervert. Jesus."

I scrubbed a hand over my face and threw out the inappropriate image before approaching, keeping my eyes firmly glued to his sleep-slackened face and ignoring the soft gusts of air passing between his plump lips and the long lashes sitting delicately on his cheeks.

He's your kid, I reminded myself for the millionth time.

I sat on the edge of the coffee table but refused to reach out and touch him.

"Creed?"

He slept on, not a single twitch to acknowledge my presence.

"Creed, it's time to get up."

Nothing.

Sighing, I fisted my hands and tensed before reaching out and shaking his shoulder, ensuring I didn't make contact with bare flesh. "Creed?"

He tucked the dangling arm under his chin and drew his knees up until he was in the fetal position on his side. He smacked his lips, that tiny pink tongue darting out once to wet them.

And I refused to acknowledge the glimmering trail it left behind.

"Creed, please wake up. I'm hopping in a shower, and we need to get ready to go."

He slept on.

"Fuck's sake."

Reluctantly, I brought my fingers to his head and brushed the hair from his face before scratching delicately over his scalp. "Come on, kiddo. You're killing me here."

His cheek twitched, and his eyes squeezed closed tighter before they cracked open the tiniest sliver. As he slowly woke, I removed my hand. He blinked, gaze flicking down my bare torso once before they snapped back to my face, eyes widening a fraction.

"Are you awake now?"

"No," he mumbled, closing his eyes again. "Five more minutes."

I couldn't contain my smile.

"Brat. Well, how about you work on that while I go shower. We gotta be on the road soon. I'll buy us coffee on our way to the factory. Deal?"

He groaned and rolled to his stomach, stretching his long limbs across the length of the couch. "Deal." Wetting his lips again, he peeked out from behind his lids, gaze slipping, roaming down farther than before, and I felt suddenly self-conscious and way too exposed.

I jumped up from the table and aimed for the bathroom, all too aware I wore nothing more than underwear and convinced those baby-blue eyes were lingering places they shouldn't.

"I won't be long," I called over my shoulder. "Up and dressed."

Please be dressed when I'm done. Please.

He wasn't.

After a long shower—a long and as cold as I could possibly make it shower—I emerged from the washroom dressed in jeans and a work shirt sporting the Quaker logo on the left breast pocket. Creed sat cross-legged on the couch, hair sticking out in all directions, my T-shirt and his underwear the only things covering his body.

"You aren't dressed."

He stood, my shirt hanging long enough to cover what I didn't need to see—thank God. "Can I shower quick? Do you mind?"

I shook my head and waved at the bathroom, diverting my eyes to the kitchen and escaping in three long strides.

"Be fast. We gotta get out of here."

Once he'd cleaned up and collected all he owned in his tattered backpack, we set off for my work, stopping on the way for coffees and bagels. Nothing much was said between us, and I chalked it up to him being half-asleep still.

Creed leaned his head against the passenger window and stared at the passing scenery as I took us across town. Watching him, I started second-guessing myself. He seemed more troubled than tired. Deep in thought about something. He picked at a small tear in his jeans, making it bigger, tugging at the loose threads. One of his knees bounced. He did that a lot. Nerves or a need to expel energy? I couldn't tell. Either way, I let him be. For now.

At work, I found my usual parking spot and collected my duffel bag, slinging it over my shoulder. Creed copied with his backpack and leaned against the truck, staring toward the loading dock.

"Do I have to go inside?"

"No. Not if you don't want to. I'll need about twenty minutes. I have to do my inspections and sign off some stuff, then we're out. I'll find you once I'm ready. You gonna wait here?"

He shrugged and stole a glance at me for a brief second before looking away. "Yeah. I guess. It's quieter."

I turned to go but stalled, knowing something was off, feeling it in my core. I should at least acknowledge or ask about it, right? That was the fatherly thing to do, wasn't it? I didn't know him anymore. I'd missed all those teenage years and wasn't familiar with his moods like I'd been when he was little. Maybe it was nothing.

"Creed?"

He blinked, and slowly his gaze turned from the far-away nothingness where he was lost until he searched my face.

"Everything okay? You're quiet this morning."

"Oh. Yeah, I'm good. Just thinking."

"Anything you need to talk about?"

He shook his head so fast his hair flopped in his face, and he darted his eyes away. I wasn't convinced it was nothing, but I wouldn't push.

"All right. You can talk to me about anything, you know. If you need to." I paused, pivoted on my feet, and studied his profile a moment more. "I'll be back shortly."

As I wandered inside, I stewed over Creed's distracted mind. We barely knew each other anymore. The likelihood of him coming to me about anything was slim. When I considered the fleeting glances from earlier that morning, the way his gaze had slipped over my near nakedness, I wasn't sure I wanted to know what he was thinking.

"Rhyker!"

I shook off my musing and grinned at Elijah, one of the forklift drivers who approached on foot with the standard stack of forms I needed to review before heading out.

"Am I all loaded?"

"You know it." He handed me the clipboard and tilted his head to the side. "Who was the blond with you yesterday? Everyone was talking, saying Rhyker has some young, hot piece of ass following him around. Seriously? Why am I just hearing about this now? I thought we were friends."

I scanned my shipping order forms and tried to wipe the images of Creed sprawled out on my bed from my mind. Why was it so insistent on lurching forward and assaulting my brain like that?

"He's my son. You know me better than that. Showed up out of the blue a few days ago. Haven't seen him in ten years."

“No shit. I didn’t know you had a kid. Since fucking when? Again, why am I just learning this?”

“Because apparently, we need to have more sleepovers with popcorn and gossip. We aren’t twelve-year-old girls, last I checked. Besides, I don’t share my life like that, you know better.” I stuck the clipboard under my arm. “He’s gonna come along with me on this run. Not sure what his plans are, but he’s adrift at the moment and doesn’t want to get left behind. He ran away from home, and I’m not throwing him out.”

“Wow. Alrighty, then. Look at the bright side, you’ll have entertainment for the long haul, and you’ll get to know him better.”

I chuckled. “Guess so. All right, I’m gonna get my inspection done and get the fuck outta here. Later.”

I punched Elijah on the shoulder and headed for my rig.

In under twenty minutes, I was ready to go. I pulled the rig out of the loading dock and left it running while I went to find Creed. He was leaning against my truck in the parking lot, typing away on his phone, deep grooves marring his forehead.

“Ready, kiddo?”

He startled and stuffed his phone in his pocket, looking guilty. “Yeah. Ready.”

He fixed his backpack on his shoulder and started off ahead of me at a near sprint. I fell in stride beside him, easily keeping pace with my longer legs while guiding him to the truck. At the passenger door, I helped him up since it was a tricky climb and slammed the door behind him once he was settled in the seat.

This would be a lot of hours on the road together. I sure hoped it wasn’t going to be filled with this odd tension the entire time. I wasn’t sure what to do with it.

I tossed my duffel behind the seat into the extended cab. “You can put your shit back here too if you want more room,” I said, thumbing over my shoulder.

Creed swiveled on his seat, his gaze roaming the cab where a pull-down bed was located along with multiple overhead compartments, a tiny fridge, and other odds and ends. A small space where a driver could rest if needed.

“You sleep in the truck?”

“No. Never have. I can, but I prefer a motel and a shower.”

“Oh.” He chucked his bag beside mine and took one last look around before shifting to face forward again. “I’ve never been in a big truck like this.”

“Well, buckle up. It will be exciting for about ten minutes, then you’ll be bitching about how boring it is.”

I took us out of the city and onto the long stretch of highway we’d be traveling for a good portion of our day. “Let me know if you need a bathroom break. Otherwise, I like to get the majority of the miles under our belt before stopping for food.”

“You drive for eight hours a day?”

“Yeah. Company policy. Most truckers abide by the eleven-hour rule, but Quaker caps us off at eight. I generally take an hour break for lunch. So nine total. Safety. That’s enough hours on the road for me anyway.”

Creed nodded but fell silent. I checked on him repeatedly from the corner of my eye, but he was lost in thought, looking out the window again. Only this time, he snapped at his rubber bracelet.

To kill the weighted silence, I turned on the radio. It was an easy-listening country station that provided decent background noise for when I traveled. I turned it up to distract myself so I wouldn’t worry about Creed and whatever was going on with him.

Less than five minutes later, he reached over and turned it down. Without a word, he resumed looking out the window as he picked at his band. Maybe he didn’t like country music.

“Wanna pick a station? I’m easy. Whatever you wanna listen to.”

He glanced over and stared for a beat before mumbling, “Sure.” Then he turned the knob, dialing in various different stations until he came to one he liked. My easygoing attitude bit me in the ass when some pulsing rap like garbage came through the speakers. Lovely.

He kept the volume low but drummed his fingers to the beat on his thigh. Not wanting to be an ass, I turned it up for him to show my good nature and suffered with the noise while we continued our journey.

In less than five minutes, he turned it down again. It was then I realized why and felt like an idiot. He was agitated about something, and the loud music on top of that inner turmoil was distressing. It’d been a lot of years, but I saw it plain as day and refrained from commenting, leaving the volume alone.

“You ever been to a club?” he asked randomly.

“What, like a dance club?”

“Yeah. A gay nightclub or whatever. Ever been?”

“Years ago.”

“What’s it like? Do guys seriously fuck in the bathrooms?”

And in dark corners, and out behind the club in the alleys, and practically right there on the dance floor sometimes if they can be discreet enough.

“Why?”

“I heard they do.”

“From who?”

Creed shrugged and bounced his right knee as he snapped the band more aggressively. “You said I could ask you anything.”

I sighed internally. “All right. I did, didn’t I? Yes, sometimes they do.”

“And that’s allowed?”

“No.”

“But they do it anyway?”

“Yes.”

I braced myself for the next question, knowing what was coming.

“Have you?”

“I don’t think that’s an appropriate question for me to answer.”

“So yes?”

“Creed.”

“What? I’m nineteen, not some kid. What’s the big deal?”

“Because you’re *my* kid and it’s weird.”

I didn’t see it, but I got the sense he rolled his eyes before turning back to his window. “Are there any clubs around Peterborough?”

“Why?”

“Because I wanna go. I’ve never been to one. It sounds fun. Where’s the one you went to?”

I squeezed my hands over the wheel, flicking my gaze to my speedometer and letting up on the gas since I’d climbed higher than the speed limit without noticing.

“I went to one in Toronto. It’s out of the way, and I’m not bringing you to a gay nightclub.”

“Why?”

Why? A million reasons why. The loud pulsing music notwithstanding, I’m your goddamn father is why.

“Creed—”

“Fine. Never mind. I thought you were cool.”

I didn’t respond to that. I’d rather be the uncool parent than take my gay son to a gay nightclub. My gay son who I’d picked up at the fucking bar not two days ago and who I’d brought back to my apartment to fuck. Who I’d kissed and touched and sucked his—

Stop fucking thinking about it!

I thought the conversation was dead and buried until, “How old were you when you lost your virginity?”

Jesus, kill me now.

I debated telling him to shut up, but I knew if I wanted to build a foundation with him, gain his trust, I should be a little more willing to be transparent. I’d missed the whole birds and the bees talk and didn’t know if anyone had had it with him. I *really* was not prepared for this.

“Fifteen. With your mother. It was a New Year’s Eve party, and I was drunk and trying to determine if I was truly gay. And if I can have a fatherly moment with you for five seconds? Use fucking condoms if you have sex.”

“So you regret me?”

My stomach sank, and I whipped my head in his direction before turning my attention back to the road. “That’s not what I meant. Of course I don’t. But fifteen was really young to be a parent.”

“I’m not fifteen.”

“Use condoms.”

“But I know I’m gay. It would be pretty fucking hard to make another guy pregnant.”

“Use a fucking condom.”

“Dad—”

“Creed! Use—”

“A condom. Got it. I can’t believe you fucked a girl. That just sounds so gross to me.”

A laugh burst from my chest unexpectedly. “I concur. Although I blame the alcohol to this day, because trust me when I say, I knew long before the act happened that it wasn’t what I wanted. It was just too late to back out.”

“Mom is kinda a slut. I’m not surprised she pushed herself on you.”

“Don’t say shit like that. She’s still your mother.”

“Whatever. She’s a slut. You should see the long string of asshole boyfriends she drags home. And discretion is a foreign concept to her. The

shit I've seen has scarred me for life. I probably need therapy now."

Hearing that made my blood boil, especially with all the accusations thrown at me years ago. Knowing she'd brought random men into Creed's life over the years bothered me more than I expected. What the hell had she let him see? How had they treated him? Had she stood up for him at all?

"What about with a guy?" Creed asked, drawing me from my head.

"What?"

"How old were you when you first slept with a guy?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

"Because I'm curious. I'm nineteen. I've never had sex before except for…" My hands clenched on the steering wheel as I begged every god who may or may not exist to stop his words before they came out. "Well, you know, and I kinda feel long overdue."

"There is no rush." My muscles throughout my entire body were so tight the words came out sharper than I intended. I tried to loosen my jaw. Tried to breathe more evenly.

"I'm just… tired of waiting. So how old were you?"

I focused intently on the road ahead, tried to hear the rumble of the tires on the pavement over the crap music still filling the cab in the background. "I was nineteen. So the same age as you. No rush. See?"

"Was it in a nightclub bathroom?"

"No."

"Was it a hookup?"

"No. We dated for a long time after."

"Does it hurt?"

For half a second, his question didn't compute. I frowned and flicked my gaze across the middle console where Creed peered back with a look of expectation.

"What do you mean?"

"Sex. In the ass. Does it hurt? Have you let a guy stick his—"

"Please stop talking. I'm begging you."

And in case he didn't get the message that we'd fallen *way* into the realm of inappropriate territory, I flicked the volume knob so the music blared so loud you couldn't think, let alone talk over it.

And then I hated myself because I knew what it would do to Creed and saw his body tense and his shoulders climb to his ears.

My heart raced, and beads of sweat trickled down the middle of my back. Like it wasn't bad enough I'd been haunted by our near sexual encounter—*Nothing near about it, buddy. You sucked his dick. He sucked yours. Remember?*—I certainly didn't need to describe how bottoming felt to my nineteen-year-old son.

Nope. But you almost showed him.

SHUT UP!

Creed stirred and drew his knees up to his chest. He suffered for a good ten minutes with the pulsing beat of Eminem or Jay-Z or whatever it was that I could hardly stand before punching the radio button and turning it off completely.

And you want to go to a nightclub? Oh, kiddo, that would mess you up.

Creed scowled out the window for the next two hours, not speaking, refusing to look at me, abusing his wrist incessantly with that stupid rubber band. For a short while, I thought I could hear him grinding his teeth.

By midmorning, he was so fidgety I thought I'd have to pull over. One fist knocked a steady rhythm on the windowpane beside his head. He couldn't stop moving. Between his knees bouncing, zipping the zipper on his hoodie up and down endlessly, making weird noises with his mouth, and spinning in his seat and fixing his seat belt a dozen times in ten minutes, I second-guessed if this was a good idea having him along on a week's road trip to and from Winnipeg.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I bit out, "Should I stop?"

"Why?"

"You're very restless."

His whole body went still. "I'm sorry."

The meek way he responded told me he'd been yelled at many times in his life for being the way he was. And of all people, I knew he couldn't help it.

"It's okay. I'm not angry. I just thought maybe you needed to stretch your legs."

He wouldn't look at me, but I watched his muscles twitch. He reached for his band and stopped himself, squeezing his fingers into his palms. "Maybe. Yeah. That'd be good."

"There's a place we can have lunch about twenty minutes from here. Can you hold on that long?"

"Yeah."

Creed fought the impulse to squirm as he watched the road ahead. It was ten more minutes before he said, “Dad?”

I blew out a breath and said a silent prayer we weren’t going to revisit our earlier conversation. “Yeah, kiddo.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you. I’ve just never had anyone to talk to about that kind of stuff. Toby tries, but he’s not gay, and he can’t tell me any more than what he looks up online. So… I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. It’s just… something I’ve been worried about, you know?”

I did know. I’d been there once. I’d been nineteen and unsure. Had I not met Emmet, who was a few years older and far more experienced than me, I’d have fumbled into sex just the same as Creed and it might not have been the positive experience I ended up with.

I still didn’t want to answer his question.

“I’m not upset. Sex is something you’ll figure out as you experience it. Don’t go running to a nightclub for your first time. Trust me. That’s asking for a bad experience.” I was going to leave it at that but felt obligated to tack on one more piece of information. “It will probably be uncomfortable at first, but it shouldn’t hurt. Don’t let anyone tell you differently. A caring partner will make sure he doesn’t cause you pain,” I mumbled.

“Thanks.” The response was a mere whisper.

Neither of us spoke until we reached the rest station.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirteen
Creed

DAD EXITED THE OFFICE building of the ratty motel we'd stopped at for the night and grinned across the parking lot at me. He was more relaxed than this morning, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd overstepped, but I couldn't help it. The questions I'd asked were actually a mask for the much racier ones I couldn't bring myself to voice. The ones that had been gnawing at me and making mulch of my insides. The ones that wondered why I couldn't shake this pull toward him. Why I didn't feel more disgusted or worried.

The motel was a few kilometers off the highway on a desolate country road just outside a small town. The parking lot was large enough Dad could fit the rig without issue and empty enough that I wondered if we were the only people staying here. Apart from a rusted-out silver Cadillac parked near the office and a beat-up Ford F-150 missing its tailgate, there weren't any other vehicles present.

Dad strutted across the parking lot, eyes glued to me as he bounced keys in his hand, tossing them in the air and catching them again. Over and over. The late afternoon sun kissed the horizon behind him, leaving his body almost silhouetted. He wore his jacket open, and his shades were propped up on his head. More than once I noticed how his jeans hugged his thighs and his beard gave him a rugged, rougher edge.

He was attractive. Not GQ model sexy, by any means, but subtly hot in a country boy sort of way. When he was relaxed and stopped freaking out about our near miss, his eyes took on a glimmer that made him look younger. There was a reason I'd gone along with his advances at the bar. And I was done trying to deny it too.

"Here." He tossed the keys in my direction, and I caught them with one hand. He tipped his chin to the line of rooms on the far side of the parking lot. "One seventeen. Go unlock the door, I'm gonna grab our stuff from the cab."

The motel was set up in a long L shape. Our room was located in the arm facing away from the main office, right at the end, as far from everyone

else as possible. I fit the key in the lock and shoved the door with my shoulder when it stuck.

Wood rubbed against wood, but it eventually gave way, and I stumbled inside, the chemical smell of bleach and stale air hitting me in the face. Underneath, there was a lingering musty odor that tickled my nose.

I flicked the switch on the wall, and a dim yellow light came on, highlighting the room. A threadbare carpet in a brownish-orange color covered the floor, stained in places and with obvious burn marks in others. There were two double beds, a TV and stand that looked like they came out of the eighties, and a window unit air conditioner slash heater which groaned as it ran, pumping out hot air if the sweltering heat surrounding me said anything. The gaudy, mustard-colored drapes were pulled over the window so little sunlight leaked in.

It was… about as bad as the place I'd stayed back in Peterborough.

"Our travel budget is small. It's this or the truck, and that pull-down bed is only about half the size of those ones," Dad said as he came into the room behind me, his duffel over one arm and our bag of food we'd stopped for clutched in his other hand.

"Beggars can't be choosers, I guess. It's fine."

"It's hot." Dad dropped his duffel and our food onto one of the beds and frowned at the unit in the window. "That doesn't sound healthy."

He squatted in front of it, fiddling with the knobs as it whined and chugged, spitting a few times before dying out and growing quiet. "Shit." Dad punched a few buttons, clicked the dials one way then the other before tugging the cord from the wall. "So that's not happening. It's stuck on full heat, and the thermostat doesn't seem to be working. If it gets cold, we can turn it back on."

He stood and surveyed the room. For a brief moment as he stared at the bed arrangement, something flashed in his eyes, his jaw tensed, his fists clenched, then it was gone.

"Hungry?" He grabbed the paper bag containing our takeout and brought it to the ancient TV table where he had room to lay it all out.

"Yeah. Starving."

We'd bought Italian from a place just off the highway. It was one of the few choices in the small plaza we'd passed on our way to the motel. We could have ordered pizza, but Dad wanted pasta, and I didn't care one way or the other.

He handed me a Styrofoam container filled with spaghetti and meatballs, a plastic fork, and a can of Coke. I sat cross-legged on the bed not containing Dad's duffel and dug in. He sat on the other bed as far away from me as possible. I sensed a pattern. He still wasn't over our reunion.

Our meal passed in expected silence. When I'd eaten all I could, I tossed my container in the garbage and wandered the small room, needing to move, unable to sit still after having been crammed in a truck for most of the day.

The washroom was small. The white towels were starched and scratchy, the tiling was permanently gray and dingy, and the shower stall smelled funny and was covered in a layer of hard water stains that they hadn't bothered removing. Gross.

I wrinkled my nose and backed out of the bathroom, undecided if I'd shower tonight and risk exposure to whatever was probably growing in there. The entire hotel room belonged on the set of a horror movie. It had that whole middle of nowhere, trashy, 1980s feel to it. Like there was a secret passage we didn't know about somewhere, and the guy from the office was probably some serial killer just waiting until we fell asleep to sneak in and mutilate us but not before making us participate in his evil games.

"Wanna toss a ball around? I think I have one in the truck."

I startled from my horror plot and blinked at Dad.

"Um… Sure."

The sun wasn't quite down when Dad hopped into the truck again, searching for the football he claimed was somewhere among the junk in the cab. We had maybe an hour before it'd be too dark to play.

"How about a frisbee? I can't find the ball. Maybe I took it out."

"I don't know how to throw a frisbee."

Dad jumped down with a neon green disc in his hand and slammed the truck door. "It's not too hard. I'll show you."

We wandered to the field behind the motel, where Dad gave me a quick demonstration.

"It's all in the wrist. Come stand beside me, and I'll show you." I did, and he grinned, his eyes hidden behind his shades. "Okay, so you don't want to move your whole arm like this, or it will go sideways. Your arm will aim the direction, but the action itself is in the wrist. It's just a small

flick. A snap. That’s how you keep control and send it where you want it to go. Watch.”

He pointed into the distance, aimed, and let the frisbee sail in a perfect arc into the sky. It landed a few dozen feet away. Dad nudged my side with an elbow and took off after it. “Come on. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I caught up as he snagged the disc from the ground. He handed it to me, and I flipped it over in my hands, examining it. It didn’t look hard.

I took a stance, held my arm like he’d shown me and squinted into the distance where I hoped it would go, then I made the flick action like he’d done and released. It went sideways and didn’t sail at all like his had. My throw wobbled and dropped like a stone, rolling in circles until it came to a stop about ten feet away.

He chuckled and tugged my arm before running after it. “Not quite. Try again.”

I frowned as he handed it back to me. I positioned myself again and took aim but stalled when Dad said, “Wait. Not your whole arm, remember? Just the wrist.”

I stared at my posture, not understanding. “Show me again.”

For a beat, he watched me. I couldn’t see his reaction behind his sunglasses. When he held out his hand for me to give him the frisbee, I shook my head. “Show me how to keep it straight while I do it.”

There was a slight tightening in his jaw and a long pause before he ducked his head and nodded.

Another lengthy pause ensued before he moved in behind me.

One arm wrapped around my waist, and he covered my hand with his so we both held the frisbee. His other hand rested against my hip, not touching but touching. Like he wasn’t sure it was okay.

“Like this.” He moved my arm in a sweeping motion then flicked my wrist out without releasing the frisbee. “See how it’s different?”

I couldn’t breathe. His warmth against my back was unexpected. That masculine scent I couldn’t erase from my mind hit me so suddenly, I shuddered and hoped like hell he hadn’t felt it. Every place he touched me was on fire, and I couldn’t process his instructions to save my life. I was right back in his bedroom again, sprawled out half-naked as he worshiped me. Kissed me. Touched me. Brought me to a blinding orgasm with his mouth.

My heart thrashed, and I squeezed my eyes closed, begging my body to stay relaxed. Begging my dick to stand down.

I was really and truly fucked.

All day, I'd been thinking about things I shouldn't. All day, I'd been reliving that mind-blowing orgasm. All day, I'd wanted nothing more than a repeat. With him. I'd even typed a text to Toby, confessing everything, but I'd failed to send it because Dad had caught me off guard that morning, and I'd pocketed my phone instead.

I'd since second-guessed myself and erased it.

What was wrong with me?

Hormones. You're just fucking horny as hell and got your first taste of sex at the hands of your fucking dad. That's all. He's been a hero in your mind for as long as you can remember. It's not surprising. It doesn't hurt that he's gorgeous and strong and sexy and looked at you once with that hunger in his…

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

"Understand?" Dad asked.

What?

"Sure." I hadn't heard a thing. My mind screamed and rebelled, and for a split second, flashed dozens of scenarios in my head all at once. I wondered, briefly, what he'd do if I pressed back against him. Ground my ass against his dick. Would he grow hard? Would he throw caution to the wind, take me back to the room, throw me on the bed, and feed me his dick again?

God help me, I barely stopped myself from arching back against him in time.

"On the count of three." His beard scratched the shell of my ear, and the warm gust of his breath tickled. "One…" *Don't press back against him.* "Two…" *Oh shit, my dick is fucking granite right now.* "Three."

The frisbee soared nowhere near where I aimed.

And Dad laughed.

The vibrations traveled through me before his weight was gone. I almost whimpered, but I bit my tongue.

"It takes practice. You'll get it."

I didn't want to do this anymore. My dick was hard, and my face was burning up. I couldn't turn around in fear he'd see both. He'd definitely see the truth in my eyes because I couldn't hide it.

The ugly, disgusting, unforgivable truth. So I ran after the frisbee to get away from him.

"Want me to show you again?" he called as I ran.

Yes!

"No, I'll figure it out. Let's just try playing."

I banished every troubling thought from my head and tugged my shirt down, hoping to hide my erection. I'd keep a distance between us. He wouldn't see. He couldn't know.

Frisbee was a lot trickier than it looked. Dad stayed patient and didn't complain about running after my misthrown attempts that went sideways more times than not. By the time the sun had disappeared, I was doing better and managed to get about every fourth throw to go in the right direction.

My body had calmed too. Thank God.

When it was too dark to play any longer, we returned to our room.

That small, suffocating space where we'd be confined together overnight. Where I'd be able to watch him sleep from a few feet away and *not* touch him.

Because it's wrong.

"I'm gonna shower. You can see if there's something on the TV, if you'd like. I won't be long, and then the bathroom is all yours."

I sat on the end of the bed and flipped through the channels, not paying attention to the shows. I did not think about how Dad was stripping naked behind that closed door, nor did I think about how the body wash he'd taken in with him would slide over his skin as he washed. And I most certainly did not think about his cock and how long and thick it was, how the weight of it felt on my tongue and how the salty taste of his precum had dripped into my mouth.

I shoved a hand against my growing arousal and cursed every impossible image that teased my mind. When the shower cut out, I tugged my backpack onto my lap to hide my erection and waited for him to come out so I could rush in and slam the door behind me. I would jerk off under a cold shower and get rid of all this tension. I *would not* keep going down this path because it was disgusting and wrong.

Keep telling yourself that. You're almost convinced, aren't you?

SHUT UP!

When Dad emerged from the bathroom, he wore boxer briefs and a T-shirt. I refused to meet his eyes as he crossed to his bed and pulled back the blankets.

While his back was turned, I darted to the bathroom and slammed the door behind me. The steam from his shower had fogged the mirror, and the humidity in the small room made my clothing stick to me. His scent was everywhere.

My heart hammered with residual adrenaline as I stripped my clothes and kicked them aside. Leaning back against the bathroom door, I squeezed the base of my cock to encourage it to settle down. At that same instant, Dad banged on the door.

I yelped and flew to the other side of the room, shielding my naked body like he was about to walk in. He didn't.

"Hey, kiddo, I left my body wash and shampoo in there for you to use. Bring it out when you're done. I don't want to forget it."

"Okay."

I waited to ensure he was gone again before turning on the shower and getting under, tugging the curtain in place to hide inside the small cubicle. The scent of musk and pine engulfed me. It smelled like him, and I couldn't stop my body's reaction if I wanted to. A wave of tingling heat rippled through my veins and pulsed between my legs.

Fuck!

Biting my lower lip, I reluctantly leaned against the disgusting shower wall and squeezed my eyes closed as I fondled my swollen cock. Inhaling the residual scents lingering in the air, drawing up the memory of his big arms around my waist, remembering the taste of his tongue, I jerked myself hard and fast.

I was so fucking turned on, I peaked in a few short tugs and almost cried out as I came in multiple pulses over my hand and all over the shower stall. I closed my eyes, catching my breath as my head spun with the intensity of release.

This was bad. Really, really bad.

And I didn't feel remotely satisfied. My dick hadn't calmed. In fact, it remained in a semi-erect state while I scrubbed myself with soap and washed my hair. I berated myself over and over for what I'd done. When I'd been under the water long enough to wrinkle, I shut it off and dried myself on a rough towel.

In my backpack, I dug out Dad's T-shirt and a clean pair of underwear. I dressed, taking an extra minute to ensure I wasn't engorged before I brushed my teeth and sneaked back into the room.

The TV was set to some news broadcast, and Dad was fast asleep, lying on his back with his arms folded behind his head. He'd pulled back the covers on the bed but hadn't bothered covering himself once he'd lain down.

His hairy legs and thick thighs were on display, as was a significant mound in the front of his underwear. There was a small strip of skin visible where his shirt pulled up. His navel and the soft, dark fuzz on his belly called to me, pooling my saliva.

My cock thickened again—*you fucker*—and I froze three steps from the washroom, backpack hugged to my chest. Why was I being tested like this? It wasn't fair.

I couldn't drag my eyes away, and I wondered how many levels of fucked up I had to be for the thoughts I was having and the things I was envisioning. Except, it wasn't a fantasy. I *knew* what it was like being the object of his desire. For about forty minutes the other night, I'd been given a taste of that nirvana. How was I supposed to erase it from my mind like it'd never happened?

Using my backpack as a shield, I crept into the room and shut off the TV, followed by the lights. If he woke, he didn't need to see my hard-on. He didn't need to witness how disturbed I truly was. He'd probably leave me on the side of the road or send me back to Mom. The thought terrified me.

I crawled onto my bed and lay on top of the covers, too warm to get underneath, too distraught to remain still, too horny to sleep. It was dark in the room, but tiny ribbons of light shone through the crack in the drapes and danced over the ceiling. It was enough illumination to give the room shape. Definition.

I could make out the furniture and the outline of the lamp near the TV. The doorway to the washroom was nothing more than a long, dark rectangle at the far side of the room. As my eyes adjusted, it was easier to pick out smaller details. The phone on the end table. The light switch on the wall. A tacky piece of art that hung over my bed and a matching one over Dad's. I couldn't remember what the paintings were of, but their frames stood out.

And Dad. His outline became more clear as I adapted to the dark.

I noted the curve of him still sleeping about six feet away. His light snores filled the quiet room. Even in darkness, I could see the shape of his legs and the stretch of his torso, long and lean. I could even imagine his dick growing hard as I stared at the faint shape of it, the outline just barely visible in the dark.

His next breath came out on a long sigh. Or was it a moan? Was he dreaming?

His arm moved, and for a second, I thought he was awake. He adjusted himself in his underwear, reaching under the band and shuffling things about before replacing his hand under his head. My breath caught in my throat.

On my side, I lay perfectly still and watched. I wasn't tired. In fact, I was the opposite of tired. I was wide awake, curious, needy, wanting…

Again, he made that noise. Not quite a sigh, not quite a moan. More of a strangled tone that was choked off and muffled.

It did things to me. I spread my legs a bit and fondled myself through my underwear as I watched him sleep, listening for more noises. Lost in lust and throbbing need, I allowed my imagination freedom.

I pictured myself naked, crawling onto his bed and straddling his thighs. Letting his hard length drag across my backside as I rocked against him, peering down into his eyes.

I tucked my hand in my underwear and gripped my cock, tugging slowly as I let this forbidden fantasy play out.

In my imagination, he was awake and staring up at me with wonder and desire. Lust. The same need as me. Those big calloused hands glided over my skin as I jerked myself and ground harder against his erection. He groaned and dug his fingers into my sides as he thrust his hips off the bed, needing more. Needing me. "Want to fuck you," he said in that voice thick with desire.

My underwear was inhibiting my movements, so I shifted them down and off, not caring that Dad could wake at any moment and catch me jerking off. I rolled to my back, closed my eyes, and let it all consume me. Let those wants and needs and desires take me away.

All the things that had happened that night in his bed happened again. He licked my cock, sucked me until I spilled in his mouth. He shoved his thick length down my throat until I gagged and he couldn't take it anymore. I wouldn't stop him. Ever. I liked it. I wanted more.

In the fantasy world that wasn't real, he removed my underwear and sucked two fingers into his mouth before bringing them to my backside. Then he filled me with them, pressing so deep I groaned.

I froze because I didn't know if I groaned for real or just inside my head. My hand on my cock stilled, pulsing in time with my heart as I listened for Dad's breathing.

For a moment, I didn't hear it, and my heart thrashed, thinking he'd woken up and knew what I was doing.

But life realigned when his soft snores returned.

I breathed a sigh of relief and moved my hand again. Slowly at first, but my desperation to come was gaining strength. It hummed and sang through my body. It curled my toes. Tingled through my veins. Raged in my core.

I imagined Dad guiding himself inside me. There was pain, but there was pleasure too. So much pleasure. He thrust, angling to get deeper as I gyrated and moved above him.

I stroked faster, wishing I could feel that fullness in my ass. Needing it more than I could process. I hiked my knees up, lifting my hips off the bed. Without pausing to think, I sucked one of my fingers to make it wet and moved it to my backside.

I'd never done anything like this before. The only time I'd had anything inside me was *that* night. Was him. The minute I pressed that single digit deep and found that place, blinding pleasure ripped through me, and I came. Great pulsing spurts covered my chest and flew as high as my chin. I did all I could to strangle off my cries.

I shuddered and clenched and ground my teeth as wave after wave rolled over me. My ears rang. My skin buzzed. My cock echoed each beat of my heart as residual tremors rocked my brain offline.

It was a long time before my senses returned. Only then did I worry if I'd been discovered. I was covered in cum. Panting. Sweating. Twitching.

And oh so fucking sated I wanted to drift off to sleep just like that.

I lay still and listened, turning my head to examine my dad and see if he'd noticed.

After five minutes of no reaction, I said a small prayer of thanks and sneaked to the bathroom to clean up.

That had been dangerous. And all kinds of erotic.

But mostly stupid, I told myself.

I needed to get a grip.
Like yesterday.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Fourteen
Rhyker

IT TOOK ALL MY willpower to remain still and pretend I was asleep. With my eyes squeezed shut, his residual panting filled my ears. Even on the inside of my eyelids, I could see his hand moving frantically over his cock. The arch of his back as he lifted off the bed. The slight parting of his lips made more visible by the single ray of moonlight hitting his face.

Those fucking lips!

I adamantly refused to acknowledge my body's response.

When he came, when that single, strangled whimper left his throat, my skin beaded with sweat and tremors ricocheted through my bones. But it was that barely audible moan that did me in. The faint echo of the word *"Dad"* whispered into the dark room at the precise moment of his release.

No, kiddo. No, no, no! God, no. Please, no.

Everything fell silent after that. I froze. Ordered my breathing to a steady, even pattern. Wished the knocking in my chest would calm. Prayed my cock wouldn't betray me.

Five minutes.

Ten.

Why wasn't he moving? Was he asleep? Did he know I was awake?

Then I heard the whisper of his feet on the carpeted floor, sneaking off to the bathroom. The door clicked closed, water ran for a few minutes, then he returned and crawled into bed. Still, I remained unmoving. Still, I held my breath.

It took twenty minutes before I was sure he was asleep. The instant his breathing changed, the minute those soft snores filled my ears, I was out of bed and tugging on my clothes so fast I was in danger of falling over. My head clouded with thick fog, and I was dizzy.

I needed air.

I needed to get away from here and think.

I do not need more images of my son, naked and tempting me, in my brain. Fuck me! Motherfucking fucker!

Once outside, I made for my truck, crossing the dark parking lot at a quick stride, my heart trying to give out, my lungs rebelling. Instead of getting in where I'd feel more confined, I circled the rig and found a shadowed tree on the other side, a private place just off the pavement where I could sit and think. Somewhere in the open where the walls didn't feel like they were pressing in from all sides.

With my back against the tree, I buried my face in my hands and waited for the quaking to cease and the waves to stop drowning me. I wasn't sure what part of Creed's little display bothered me more. The fact that he'd knowingly jerked off in a room, *in a bed*, right beside me. The fact that he'd moaned *"Dad"* right at his peak, his voice raw with ecstasy. Or the part where my body had responded and caught fire and nearly followed simply by hearing that breathy cry.

The tremors wouldn't stop. My lungs were full of water. The walls inched closer until they crushed me. I couldn't escape.

"I'm a terrible father. They should lock me up and throw away the key. This is all my fault. All my fault… All my fault."

For an hour, I sat against the base of the tree, muttering, hugging my knees to my chest, waiting for the storm inside to calm. We needed to talk. I couldn't let this continue. It wasn't healthy. Creed was nineteen and obviously extremely hormonal. So much so, he'd latched onto that single, unintentional experience we'd shared and flown with it. It had to stop. Here and now. No more. It wasn't safe for him to think and relive those things. It wasn't appropriate. It was fucking with me on a level I couldn't comprehend.

When I felt more settled, when the shaking stopped, and the air entered my lungs with more fluidity, I returned to our room. Creed was curled up on his side, facing away from me. His breathing was still soft and deep. I inched through the darkness and got under the covers fully dressed.

Sleep took forever to find me, and that motherfucking bitch of a dream just had to surface. My subconscious mind was tainted, and I spent the rest of the night skirting the edge of orgasm at the hands of a gorgeous blond with a killer mouth and eagerness behind his pale blue eyes. It was too vivid. Too riveting.

Too real.

WE WERE UP AND on the road by eight in the morning. I couldn't—*wouldn't*—look at Creed. Every time I did, I saw that look of ecstasy on his face as he arched his back and came all over his chest. With burnt-tasting coffee from a gas station and prepackaged baked goods that tasted overly processed and chemically, we followed the highway.

The farther we drove, the more I knew I had to broach the subject. But how did I put it to words?

"Creed? I think—"

"Did you ever call that doctor?"

I sputtered and twisted my hands on the steering wheel. "No. I forgot. When we stop for lunch later, remind me, and I will."

"Okay."

When he didn't go on, I tried again.

"I think we need to talk about something. Last night—"

"Was I any good at soccer or baseball as a kid? I clearly suck at frisbee. Were sports ever my thing?"

"Creed—"

"I didn't play them in Saint John. Didn't really do anything. Mom signed me up for Scouts when I was thirteen, but I hated it. They made us do arts and crafts and taught us to sew and do dumb shit for badges. They even took us camping once, and it was the most miserable thing ever."

"Creed, I really think we need to discuss—"

"They made us cook on a campfire, too. Do you know how shitty that is? Everything tasted like ashes. It was black and gritted in our teeth. Who the fuck wants to eat like that? Not me. And anyone who says sleeping in a tent is fun clearly has issues. A sleeping bag does not function as an adequate mattress. Every rock and lump on the ground dug into my back. It was horrible. I'm not some fucking prissy princess or anything, but seriously, who likes that? There was this one—"

"Creed!" I didn't mean to yell and make him jump, but he was getting off on a tangent, and it felt deliberate.

He clamped his mouth shut and shrank back in his seat, eyeing the passing scenery out his side window. Immediately, he reached for his band and started snapping it against his wrist.

I sighed. "I'm sorry I yelled. Listen, there is something we need to talk about. It's important. Last night—"

"I know."

I bit off my next words and spared him a glance before returning my eyes to the road. His cheeks were flushed, and he looked nervous as he gnawed his lower lip.

“You know?”

He nodded.

He knew what? That I hadn’t been sleeping? Had he heard me escape? Had he put on a show on purpose?

“Creed, it was wrong.”

“I don’t care.”

“You should. I’m your father. It’s… disturbing.”

“It doesn’t bother me. I won’t tell anyone.”

I screwed up my brow and flicked my gaze at him again. Were we talking about the same thing? “Well, it bothers me, and you won’t do it again. Understand?”

There was a long pause before he responded, “Do what again? What are you talking about? You’re the one who was dreaming. I can’t control *your* dreams. But I told you, I won’t tell anyone. It didn’t bother me. It should, but it didn’t. I…”

I flinched and tilted my head to the side when he trailed off. Rolling those words around my head, my skin prickled. *My dreams?* Everything was misfiring, and I was confused. How did we go from his jerk-off session to my… *Oh fuck. Was I vocal? Did I…*

I couldn’t have this conversation and focus on the road.

We were on a long, desolate country highway, so I threw on my hazards and pulled off to the side of the road. When I put us in park and set the emergency brake, I swung around on my seat and assessed him. He scowled, arms crossed over his chest.

I decided to ignore his comment about my dream and pretend I’d misheard and focused instead on the real issue.

“Creed, your actions last night were inappropriate. I saw you and heard you, and it’s wrong on so many levels I don’t even know where to begin this conversation. What happened between us a few nights ago was wrong. I need to know you hear me and understand what I’m saying. I’m your dad. I can’t play a role in your fantasies, nor should you be using them to get off. It was uncomfortable to watch. And… wrong. Just really wrong.”

The defiance leaked away, and his eyes widened. There was a fraction of a second where he looked startled before his baby blues darkened with

ferocity.

“Kinda hypocritical, don’t you think?”

“What are you talking about?” My inner temperature rose ten degrees and sweat beaded across my brow.

Playing dumb doesn’t look good on you.

Shut up!

“Who were you dreaming about this morning? Who was it who made you pant in your sleep and palm yourself through your jeans more than once? Who brought that gravelly low moan to your lips?”

“Creed,” I said through gritted teeth. “This stops right here and now. Whatever you thought you saw, you didn’t. We are talking about you and last night. It was—”

“Wrong,” he yelled. “Yeah, you mentioned that once or twice. I heard you. I’m not fucking deaf. But you’re not getting off that easy.” He paused, assessing me before his anger melted away and something happened. A look of intent crossed his face, and he was out of his seat before I could react, crowding me until I had no choice but to lean back to keep space between us. A futile effort. “It was me, wasn’t it? You can’t stop thinking about it either, can you?”

He shoved me by the shoulders until my back pressed against the seat, then he straddled my lap, not sitting but hovering above me, looming, leering, invading my space, smiling knowingly.

“You’re right, Dad. Last night, I jerked off right there in the bed beside you. Do you want to know what I was thinking about?”

“No,” I croaked, unable to convince myself to push him off yet knowing I should.

That smile grew, and it was evil and mischievous. “I dreamed about sucking your dick again. I thought about you fucking my ass and taking my virginity. Stretching me. Pounding me so fucking hard. Your cum filling me up when you released deep inside me. I dreamed about your mouth and your tongue. Of you licking and sucking me into oblivion. Of your hands all over my naked body.”

“This is wrong.” Three important words that needed to be said but they came out on a whisper and disappeared without consequence into the air. A weak and pitiful protest.

Creed lowered his face to mine, our breaths mingling, our foreheads touching. “But that’s what makes it so fucking hot. Don’t you get it? Are

you going to deny it? Are you going to sit there and lie to me and say it was someone else making you moan in your sleep? Someone else making you fondle your dick? Because I'll call you a liar."

"It wasn't you. It can't be you. It's wrong. God, Creed… No…"

He brushed his lips over mine, and I shivered—*I fucking shivered*—as my blood boiled and burned through me. Why wasn't I shoving him off? Why was I allowing this to continue? Where was my fucking conscience now? My sense of right and wrong?

Oh, I'm here, but it's hard to fight something when you want it this badly.

You motherfucker!

"It wasn't you," I mumbled again. Nothing about those three simple words sounded convincing.

"Such lies. Do you know how I know you're bullshitting me?"

He didn't wait for an answer, he lowered his body until he was sitting on my lap, his ass crack dragging once over my granite dick. It was all the proof he needed.

"*That* hard piece of steel right there is how I know," he breathed. "You want it too. You can lie to my face all you want, but your body will always tell me the truth."

There was still time to put my foot down. It wasn't too late. It wasn't too—

His tongue was in my mouth, licking, sucking, owning me with a ferocity I couldn't fight—didn't want to fight. I parted my lips willingly, taking him deeper with far too much urgency. It was glorious. *And wrong!* And tantalizing. *And wrong!* And gratifying. *And wrong!* And I ached for more.

Wrong, wrong, wrong!

Before I knew what I was doing, I grabbed hold of his waist and tugged him closer, lifting my hips off the seat and finding that delicious crevice to rut against again. The connection was like lightning, sparking and firing up my blood. An electric current buzzing under my skin.

Our teeth clacked and tongues battled, and I knew, *I knew*, I couldn't stop it. This wasn't going to simmer out. This was going to flare and boil over, and we were going to regret it. But we'd fallen over the edge of reasoning already, and we needed to hold on tight and hope we survived the landing.

His hard cock was pinned between our bodies and with his every rocking motion forward, it ground into my abdomen. I reached for it, not allowing my brain to catch up as I rubbed him through his pants, sucking his tongue, and loving his taste. I cataloged every moan and whimper. Noted every panting breath and sharp intake of air. Felt every tremor run through him. Relished the tight grip of his fingers where they dug into my shoulders.

Our kiss fumbled, and he groaned, shuddering as he leaned back, giving me access. I stroked him the best I could through his jeans and in the confined space at the front of the truck. His eyes fluttered closed, and I was sure if I kept up the pressure and motion on his cock, he'd come just like that.

The steering wheel had to be digging into his back. There were too many clothes in the way and not enough room for what I wanted to do to him.

And I wanted it all. Despite everything, I was greedy for it now. Determined. Lost in the pleasure and ignoring all reasoning telling me to stop. That voice was gone. Faded into the background.

I clasped my hands under his ass and pushed back against the seat until I found leverage to stand. I stumbled with him in my arms, ducking so I wouldn't hit my head on the roof of the truck as I maneuvered the cramped space. Our mouths didn't pause as I fell through into the cab. There was shit lying around everywhere, and I growled as I broke from his mouth and scanned.

Fuck this shit!

I kicked twice at the hideaway bed, trying to dislodge it from the wall before it finally fell open. Then I dropped Creed onto the lumpy, bare mattress and followed him down.

His lips were pink and adequately abused, his pupils blown wide, his cheeks flushed, his chest heaving. I tore his shirt over his head as his hands fought to remove mine next. When he went to undo my jeans, fingers trembling, I stilled his hands and studied his face. My words choked off in my throat.

I wanted to ask if he was sure. I wanted him to be the voice of reason and stop this before it was too late. But I also wanted him to beg me to continue.

“Don’t you fucking tell me no,” he growled. “I’m not some fucking kid. I know what’s happening, and you’re not pressuring me or forcing me. I want it. Do you hear me? I. Want. It.”

“Do you understand the consequences if this ever gets out?”

“We won’t get caught. No one will know.”

“And you understand how morally and ethically—”

“Dad… Shut the fuck up and stop trying to talk yourself out of it.”

He tugged me down by the arm, and I fell onto his mouth again, the wet slide of his tongue licking at mine and making my already engorged cock even harder. There were no more words. No more questions.

The next time he reached for the button on my jeans, I didn’t stop him. He shoved my pants and underwear down and wrapped his hand around my dick without pause. He didn’t hesitate. Breaking from my mouth, he stared down between us as he stroked me with agonizingly slow pulls.

“Feed it to me again, Dad. I want to taste you.”

Fuck!

I couldn’t say no. Those recurring dreams tickled my brain and encouraged me to shuffle higher. I threaded fingers through his blond hair and yanked his head back when he tried to move forward.

Those pleading eyes met mine as he glanced up and licked those luscious lips. Waiting. I knocked his hand away and fondled my cock, stroking with a purpose while staring at that mouth. Those slick with saliva lips I’d felt in my dream only last night.

I released his hair and traced my thumb over the bottom one.

“This mouth will be the death of me. You have no idea.”

Again, his tongue flicked out, grazing my thumb as his eyes glimmered dangerously. I shoved my thumb inside its wet warmth, my grip on his jaw solid as I pried his mouth open. He allowed it. Willing. Eager. Then I inched closer, milking a bead of precum to the tip of my dick and painting it over his upper lip. His tongue darted out, taking the offering and circling my swollen head once without fear or hesitation.

“More,” he moaned, unable to talk properly with his mouth forced open.

I chuckled and slid my thumb free but only so I could replace it with something bigger. Those plump, rosy lips wrapped around my head, and Creed’s eyes slipped closed as he hollowed his cheeks and sucked me down as far as he could manage without choking.

And it was better than I remembered. Better than the recurring dream. It was fucking heaven.

Propping myself on the side of the cab with both hands, I hitched my hips forward, plunging deeper, over and over, my balls hitting his chin every time. Creed clung to my thighs, lifting his head off the bed and meeting my every thrust.

When he looked up at me, his baby blues slightly watery, I couldn't look away.

"You like that, don't you?"

He nodded and forced himself to go deeper.

"That's it. Fuck. Take all you can, kiddo."

I ground my teeth as the sensations built and bled through my veins. I wasn't going to last at this rate. It was too fucking good.

I fondled my balls while he sucked, slurped, and worshiped me. When I was ten seconds from spilling, skirting that edge too closely, I took hold of his hair again and forced him off, leaving a string of drool connecting us. His lips were swollen and red. His cheeks flushed. And he panted, looking up with want.

Beautiful. So fucking beautiful.

Without a word, I edged down his body, removing his pants and underwear as I went. I smoothed a hand over the large birthmark on his thigh, the same one that had halted our activities last time. It gave me pause for a second as the realization of what was happening returned. Before it could consume me, I shoved it away.

I admired Creed's straining length standing tall and proud against his lower stomach, a patch of blond hair surrounding it. His balls were nestled between his thighs. I dragged my nose along the crease of his upper thigh, inhaling the earthy scent of his musk as I continued up his shaft. It twitched with the attention, and Creed's breaths came in short pants, his knees trembling on either side of me.

I remembered how he'd barely lasted the first time and knew without asking that I'd probably been the first man to put my mouth on his cock. Acknowledging that tidbit of information brought a possessive growl up my throat. One that frightened me because of the murderous storm it caused. *Mine*, I thought. *Fucking mine.*

I sucked him down all the way, tightening my throat muscles and making him come off the bed on a guttural cry.

“Fuck! Dad… Jesus… I can’t… Oh God… I’m gonna come already. Shit… Stop. Please.”

I pulled off, squeezing the base of his dick to stave off his release, and chuckled. “Oh, to be nineteen again.”

“Shut up. Oh my God. Holy fuck.” He covered his face with his hands as his entire body shivered uncontrollably. “It’s so good.”

Once he’d had a minute, I kept pressure around his base while I teased my tongue up and down him. Licking lightly. Sucking in only the tip. Absorbing all the noises he made.

When I had him delirious with pleasure, I sucked a finger and made it wet before circling his hole. His eyes popped open, and he choked on a gasp when I slid it inside, slowly, carefully.

Little pants left his parted lips as he watched me, hiking his knees higher and giving me access. I moved that digit in and out, going deeper each time until he was comfortable. Then I took him back into my mouth, sucked him to the root and hooked my finger to hit his prostate.

It was instant game over.

His whole body arched off the bed, and he cried out with such ferocity his voice cracked. Thick jets of cum filled my mouth. Spurt after spurt. I swallowed them all down, milking him for more, taking all he had to give. His fingers found purchase on my hair, and his nails dug painfully into my scalp as he screamed until his voice broke.

Even with his eyes squeezed closed, tiny tears leaked out their corners. When he was spent, limp and hoarse, I let him go. But I wasn’t finished. My cock ached and throbbed. I needed my own release desperately, and as much as I wanted to fuck him into the mattress, that knot, that tiny thread of conscience still remained somewhere in the back of my mind, and it stopped me.

That’s one step too far, Daddio.

So I straddled his waist again, jerking myself hard and fast. When I was three seconds from blowing my load, I pulled his lips apart again, and that little pink tongue darted out, seeking, knowing what I had planned. That eagerness set me off.

I orgasmed on a cry and shot over his face and chin, sending multiple spurts into his waiting mouth. He lapped at my thumb, sucked on it, and cleaned his lips, taking all he could get.

When I’d emptied all I had in me, I collapsed, kissing him with bruising force, licking and sucking at his tongue, combining our flavors and savoring every drop.

It was a good ten minutes before our bodies simmered, and our kiss slowed. I rolled off him, chest heaving, body still shuddering on occasion, sweat coating my skin.

We didn’t talk.

The silence between us swelled for many minutes.

As it grew, as more time ticked by, my reasoning, my conscience, that little voice I’d ignored returned with a vengeance.

It hit me like a fucking two by four in the face.

My stomach flipped, and I thought I was going to be sick.

My brain launched into red alert, and I shot off the bed, snagged my clothes, and put them on as fast as I could.

Then I left.

I fucking ran.

Out of the truck, down the deserted highway, farther and farther away. Like I could outrun this mistake. Like if I went far enough, it wouldn’t exist anymore. Like I’d been sucked into some alternate dimension for a time and would find my way back to normal land—where I hadn’t just done all *that* with my son—if I just kept running.

But it didn’t work.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Fifteen
Creed

I WOULD HAVE CHASED him down except I couldn't move a single muscle, and I knew without a doubt he didn't want me to follow. He needed time to process. His good sense had knocked down the door and bowled him over, ruining the happy buzz we had going on.

Eventually, when my limbs weren't jelly any longer, I found my clothes and dressed. In the front seat again, I peered down the road and saw him—or I assumed it was him. He was nothing more than a speck on the horizon.

With a sigh, I shut off the still-idling engine, leaving the keys dangling in the ignition, and sank back in my seat as I watched him, trying to decide if his image was getting smaller or bigger. Was he walking away still or coming back? It was hard to tell. His form didn't seem to be doing anything.

Maybe he'd gone far enough and was having his little temper tantrum breakdown right there on the side of the road. What was the big fucking deal? Okay, I wasn't stupid. He was my dad. Legally, it was wrong. Probably disgusting to most people. But I couldn't temper the feelings he aroused in me. Obviously, I wasn't the only one feeling them, too.

Dad wasn't taking it well.

What if this was the tipping point and he left me here on the side of the road? What if he told me never to contact him again? What if my pushing this had ruined everything?

I plucked the rubber band on my wrist as a swarm of possibilities came at me all at once. They raced around inside my head, and the longer Dad stayed away, the worse they got. Every good feeling disintegrated. The noise in my brain grew louder until it took all my concentration to remain seated and not run after him.

It was over an hour before his form in the distance grew larger. He was coming back. My chest tightened as I watched, unsure what would happen. What he might say. My fingers twitched, and I toyed with a loose thread on my jeans, bouncing my knee, cracking my knuckles. Fuck, I needed to move.

He wasn’t in a hurry, and his journey back to the rig took forever.

He didn’t pull my door open and yank me out like I feared. He didn’t tell me to fuck off and not come back. He simply opened his door, climbed in, checked his mirrors, turned over the engine, and drove.

He drove and drove and drove and drove.

The silence screamed and ached in my ears. My nerves made me more restless than usual, but I did my best not to fidget excessively. I fought for control with everything I had.

An hour passed.

Two.

Three.

I had to pee, but I said nothing.

Three and a half hours into our silent standoff, I couldn’t take it anymore. It was on the tip of my tongue to yell at him and tell him to get the fuck over it. I wanted to scream in his face and remind him that we’d both wanted it. We’d both enjoyed it. That it was only a big deal because he was making it a big deal.

But when I opened my mouth, none of that came out. Instead I said, “What do you call a fake noodle?”

Thanks, Toby, for teaching me to deal with my anxiety through bad jokes.

My pulse whooshed in my ears. The stretch of silence went on and on. When Dad didn’t answer, I blurted, “An im-pasta. Why did the banana go to the hospital?”

Dad’s jaw ticked. His fingers dug into the steering wheel. He didn’t respond.

“Because he was peeling really bad. What did one plate whisper to the other plate?”

Dad breathed through his nose, louder than before, his chest rising and falling. I was about to spit out the answer when his barely audible tone rumbled just above the sound of the truck. “I don’t know, what?”

“Dinner’s on me.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. So I kept pressing.

“Why can’t you trust atoms?”

He drew his lips into a flat line, and his eyes narrowed like he was thinking. I opened my mouth to give the answer, but he held up a finger, halting me, and then spoke. “Because they make everything up.”

I smiled. I couldn’t stop it from filling my face. The ice wall was melting, and I wouldn’t give up until it was gone completely. “What superhero hits the most home runs?”

He thought a moment and shook his head.

“Batman. How do you stop an astronaut’s baby from crying?”

Another long pause before he huffed a small laugh and shook his head. “No idea.”

“You rocket.”

“You need new friends.”

“Toby’s all right.”

“You’re nineteen. You should be rambling off dirty jokes that make people cringe, not Dad jokes that make people want to cry. They’re just awful.”

“Whatever, it worked. You’re talking to me again.”

And then he wasn’t. Like it all came back to him in a rush. His shoulders tensed and his knuckles turned white.

“Dad—”

“It can’t happen again, Creed. Never. Do you understand? We should *never* have done that.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes, glancing out my side window. “Whatever.”

“Not whatever. I’m dead serious.”

Whatever.

We didn’t talk for the rest of the day. Not when we stopped for lunch, not when I had to pee so badly at just shy of five in the evening and all I could do was squirm in my seat, not when we finally pulled into a hotel parking lot at six o’clock and Dad went inside to get us a room.

He wouldn’t look at me as he dug through his duffel bag and found his toiletries. He avoided eye contact when he came out of the bathroom twenty minutes later—dressed in the same jeans and T-shirt he’d worn all day—and crawled into bed fully dressed like it was sacrilege to wear underwear in front of me now.

He faced the wall, drew the covers over his head, and went to sleep without touching the submarine sandwiches we’d bought for dinner.

Dad was seriously upset.

After a long shower, I sat cross-legged on the other bed with Dad’s oversized T-shirt pulled around my legs as I picked at my sandwich. I

wasn’t hungry anymore.

His sleep-breathing filled the quiet room. It wasn’t snoring, per se, but every time he exhaled it rumbled in his chest like a growling grizzly.

He was out cold. Dead to the world.

Must be nice.

Too agitated to sleep, I flipped on the TV and set the volume low. My insides were all shaken and I couldn’t concentrate on anything. I didn’t know how to make Dad chill out about what had taken place.

He was blowing it way out of proportion. We were adults. He’d barely raised me. It wasn’t like we were *that* close as father and son. Why was it such a big deal?

I desperately wanted to text Toby and spill everything. He was always my sanity. The voice of reason. The only person who could keep me calm when the storms raged. Except, Dad seemed terrified of anyone finding out. I’d promised I wouldn’t tell anyone, so I wouldn’t. Maybe Toby would see it like Dad and be angry or disgusted. He was a cop, but I couldn’t see him dumping on our friendship like that.

I sighed, torn and agitated.

More than once, my mind wandered back to that morning. Dad had been as desperate as me. I saw it. Felt it. He couldn’t get enough. He couldn’t fight it. There had been plenty of opportunities for him to stop what had happened, but he hadn’t.

My cock swelled as I relived each moment. The feel of his mouth wrapped around me. The press of his finger deep in my ass. The way he’d pried my mouth open with a thumb and shot his load down my throat.

But I still didn’t get all I wanted.

What I wanted was his cock in my ass. I wanted to be stretched by him, pounded into the bed, shot into orbit with the power of a righteous orgasm because he fucked me so good.

This wasn’t over. No way in fucking hell was it over.

We’d only just begun.

I’d been given a taste, a glimpse of what could be, and I’d be damned if I walked away now. He wanted it. The self-restraint he still carried was frayed and thin.

I’d give him time. Let him have his little freak out. Let him come to grips with the truth.

But this wasn’t over.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Dad woke me by throwing my backpack on the bed so it landed and bounced, hitting me in the face.

“What the fuck?” I groaned, shoving it away and rubbing my nose.

“Get up. We gotta get on the road.”

“Ever heard of asking nice? You don’t need to throw shit at me.”

“I’ve been calling your name for the past twenty minutes. I’m done being nice. Let’s go.”

Well, apparently a good night’s sleep hadn’t improved his mood one bit. The door to our room opened then slammed closed, and I scowled, dragging myself upright and scanning the room. Dad’s stuff was packed and gone. There was steam covering the bathroom mirror, telling me he’d showered.

Nothing remained in the room that gave any indication he was coming back. When the truck roared to life in the parking lot, I panicked, convinced he was leaving me behind. I raced to get dressed and slung my bag over my shoulder as I flew out the door with my shoes untied and hair still amok. I could feel pillow creases on my cheeks still.

The rig idled, but he didn’t pull away. Dad sat in the driver’s seat, talking on his phone, a scowl on his face. I hustled to the passenger door and tugged it open, dropping my bag in the footwell before struggling to climb up. The damn thing was too high for a pint-sized guy like me.

Once buckled, I tied my shoes and straightened my crooked clothing as Dad hung up with whoever he was talking to. He put the truck in gear and took us back to the highway.

My anxiety wouldn’t calm. I plucked my bracelet a few times as my heart jackhammered, and I watched the road ahead.

“Are you just gonna abandon me somewhere eventually?” I couldn’t help it. I had to ask. It was quickly becoming my greatest fear. I’d sought my dad because I thought maybe he’d be the one person in my life who’d understand and accept me. Who wouldn’t treat me like the rest of them.

Dad’s chest rumbled with an almost growl. “No. Don’t be an idiot.”

“I’m not being an idiot. You’re obviously pissed off, and I’m the cause.”

“I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at myself.”

I knew that and wanted to tell him to chill out. How come he couldn’t just take it for what it was? Why did he have to make it this big thing?

“I called and left a message at the doctor’s office. They should call back with an appointment time once they’re open today.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

He grunted and drove.

So I guessed we weren’t going to discuss anything more. I sighed and leaned back in my seat, blinking against the early morning sun just cresting the horizon. It was going to be a long day.

It was an hour later when Dad’s shoulders finally relaxed. And another thirty minutes after that when he spared a glance in my direction. “You hungry?”

We’d run off without bothering to get breakfast that morning.

“A coffee would be nice.”

“Yeah. There’s a rest stop about forty kilometers ahead. You okay to wait? I can always take us off the highway and find a small town with a diner, if you want.”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“You want the radio on?”

I shook my head, knowing I couldn’t take the extra stimulation with my nerves on edge.

A short while later, we got coffee and breakfast sandwiches at the rest stop on the highway. Dad also bought a small box of donuts and wedged them in a spot between us in the truck. The tension was still palatable but my energy drained as the kilometers ticked by.

At just shy of noon, Dad stretched and groaned, cracking his neck side to side.

“We should hit Winnipeg this afternoon. Wanna stay in the city for a few days? Check it out? I’m sure I could find you a nightclub if you wanted.”

“Thought you weren’t doing that.”

“Not for me. For you.”

“Why?”

He rubbed his nose and checked his mirrors as he took us into the fast lane to pass a slower-moving truck in front of us. He didn’t speak until we’d overtaken him and returned to the right lane.

“It’d be good for you. Maybe work off some of that sexual energy you have in abundance.”

“So now you want me to hook up with a random guy in a nightclub? What happened to not doing that? What happened to ‘losing your virginity in a bar bathroom isn’t a good idea’?”

He pressed his lips together until they turned white before blowing a breath out his nose. “Losing your virginity to your father is a worse idea.”

“Says you.”

“Says the law.”

“Are we really going to argue about this again?”

“I’ll argue about it until you understand it, Creed.”

I stared at him, his profile. He wouldn’t take his eyes off the road, not even for a second.

“We already broke the law, Dad. You can lie to yourself all you want. You can pretend it didn’t happen and that you didn’t enjoy it, but it *did* happen and you sure as fuck weren’t complaining when you were shoving your dick down my throat.”

“Creed!” he snapped.

“What?” I yelled back. “It happened! You liked it! Get over it!”

“This conversation is over.”

“Ah yes, let’s go back to our silent standoff and bathe in denial, shall we?”

And… He started ignoring me again.

We hit Winnipeg late that afternoon. Dad backed the truck with exceptional skill into the docking bay where other men would unload it. He spent a half an hour doing whatever it was he had to do for drop-off before he returned to the truck and pulled his duffel from the cab.

“Come on. We’ll get a room somewhere. We aren’t far from downtown. Should be lots of options.”

Maybe I *would* find a nightclub. Maybe I would find a hot older guy and have him plow me in a back bathroom until I couldn’t think straight. I wondered if Dad would stop me. If he’d be jealous at all.

We walked down a busy main road in the downtown area of Winnipeg until we got to a suitable, Dad-approved hotel. He paid for the room and stormed to the bank of elevators, leaving me in the dust. Again. All day, he’d been stuck in temper-tantrum mode which was so juvenile and unnecessary. Seriously, so we fooled around a bit. Big. Deal.

I caught up just before the doors closed in my face and we rode to the third floor in that same familiar silence we’d been surrounded in all day.

The room was nicer than the places we'd stayed in on the road. Cleaner. It smelled less like a musty, stale hole in the wall. The furniture wasn't dated and the bathroom didn't make me cringe… much.

I picked the far bed and dropped my bag before sitting.

Dad rooted through his duffel and tugged out clean clothes in an overly aggressive manner. *Yes, Dad, you're pissy, I see it.* I rolled my eyes.

He escaped to the bathroom, showered, and returned looking fresher, dressed in designer jeans that hugged his thighs, and a black polo shirt that fit tight enough to accentuate his form. His beard was trimmed. He'd gelled his hair and smelled of earthy cologne. It was too much, and I couldn't drag my eyes away.

"I'm going out," he snapped, throwing his dirty clothes on his bag. "Do whatever you want tonight. Here's an extra room key. If you aren't here in the morning, I'm leaving without you."

I opened my mouth to respond, retort, snap something about his attitude, but he turned and stormed out the door, slamming it behind him.

I deflated, dropping back onto the bed and covering my face with my hands.

The nightclub was looking more and more enticing.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Sixteen
Rhyker

THE DARK ROOM wavered as I rolled my nearly empty mug of beer between my hands. The music wasn't skull-shattering loud but loud enough I couldn't think over the steady beat. I'd been there for hours, hunched over the bar, and had long ago lost track of how many mugs of ale I'd consumed. A lot, if the dampening of my sensory input said anything.

Yet not enough, since I could still stand upright without falling over, and my words—although semi-slurred—were still forming sentences.

I just wanted to drink enough to forget everything. I needed a hard body with a willing ass for some stress relief.

And not my son's.

There was a guy beside me who fit the bill—*what's his name again?* We'd been talking for the last hour about random shit I couldn't remember. He'd been buying me drinks and copping feels higher and higher up my thigh. I didn't mind. I liked it. Wanted it. It was why I'd gone looking for a gay bar. I needed to get Creed out of my head.

"… it became this project we worked on now and again. Rebuilding the engine and finding the beauty hidden behind years of neglect. It was great."

Why are we talking about cars?

I blinked, trying to focus and not visibly sway. I wasn't sure I succeeded when he tipped his head to the side and smiled knowingly.

"Can I get you another?" the stranger asked, nudging my elbow.

"I still have…" I stared at my empty mug. When had I finished this one? "Sure." I shoved the empty to the other edge of the bar and waved down a bartender.

"You know, Ryan," the stranger beside me said after he placed our order. "You should probably slow down. I wouldn't want all this alcohol to… impede with your night. Maybe after this one, we can take off. What do you think?" That hand squeezed my upper thigh, his thumb grazing closer to where I wanted it.

Was I really that drunk? I glanced around the bar and it took a hiccup of time for my vision to catch up. It was like moving in slow motion or

being underwater. I licked my lips and refocused on the man beside me.

Obviously we'd exchanged names at some point if he was calling me Ryan, but I couldn't for the life of me remember what to call him. It didn't matter. Names were so trivial when the goal was to fuck and forget.

He had wavy auburn hair, styled with a tad too much gel. It looked crunchy, like it would survive a great windstorm without having to be fixed. Unfortunate, since I was a hair-tugger when I got a man on his knees.

His face was nice. Angular. Sharp jaw. High cheekbones. Enough scruff to chafe—which I enjoyed. Freckles across his nose, thin lips, nice teeth. He was younger than me. Probably mid-twenties, if I had to guess. Built long and lean. Tall. Eyes green like the grass in the summertime.

He was attractive, but I couldn't stop the unwanted comparisons from battering my head. He was taller than Creed. Harder. His eyes were wrong, his lips tragically missing substance. And those fingers massaging my thigh just didn't feel the…

Jesus fucking Christ, stop it!

The bartender delivered our new drinks, and I drained over half as I tried to drown those thoughts and make them not exist anymore.

"You're thinking a little too hard for a man who's had that much to drink. What's on your mind?"

That wandering hand turned adventurous, his thumb pressing against the mound in the front of my pants. My dick twitched, and I thought, *Thank God, it's about fucking time. I'm not broken. I'm not damaged. This is what I need.*

I caught his wrist before he moved it away again and pressed his entire palm to my growing erection. His smile grew, those lips thinning even more and pressing against his teeth as mischief brewed behind emerald-green spheres.

"That's what I'm talking about," he whispered, leaning in and rubbing me more. "Finish that drink, sexy. I don't live far. Someone needs to take care of this for you, and I happily volunteer."

He kept all his attention on my swelling mound, and I closed my eyes and groaned as the sensations rolled over me. But the images on the back of my eyelids were not of this man sitting beside me. The images were of a blond man, lips full and inviting, eyes such a pale blue they were like a cloudless sky.

Fuck. No, no, no.

Growling in frustration, I opened my eyes and drained my beer before shoving the empty glass away. I snagged the back of the stranger's neck and yanked him closer so he almost fell onto my lap. Then I kissed him. Slammed our mouths together even as he grunted, speared my tongue into his mouth and rocked into that hand still on my dick. It was not soft and gentle. It was not kind. It was aggressive—nearly too much so. A desperate attempt by a desperate man who only wanted to forget.

Please forget. Please go away.

I broke from the guy's mouth and stood, pulling him up to join me. I wobbled, the room swaying and shifting, throwing me off balance. The stranger caught me around the waist and chuckled.

"Careful, sailor. You're rocking like you're on the high seas. You've been slamming back beers for hours. Maybe take it slow."

"Let's get out of here before I lay you across this bar and fuck you senseless," I growled.

He smirked, patting my chest. "All right, all right, settle down. As much as I'd love to be ruined by all this growly aggression, your little manhandling is getting us too much attention. I'm on board, believe me, but in privacy." He cocked his head and studied me for a second. "You're going to tear me up, aren't you?"

"If you want me to."

He hitched a brow. "Mmm… Yes, please. But I need the grizzly to stand down for five seconds. I need to piss. Can you control yourself a minute? I'll be right back. Try to keep it in your pants."

"Better hurry or you'll have company in that bathroom. My patience is thin."

He shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first time."

As he walked away, swaying his hips, I stared at his ass, adjusting the strain in my confining jeans. His ass wasn't nearly as bubbled and perky as —

No. Shut the fuck up. Do. Not. Go. There.

His lips weren't half as tasty, either, were they?

SHUT. UP.

You know, that beautiful boy of yours has probably taken off to some nightclub without you. Some stranger is gonna take his virginity tonight in a filthy bathroom stall. Is that what you want? Whoever he is won't be kind, either. You know it and I know it.

FUCKING. STOP.

I ground my teeth, fighting off images of Creed being used by some creep in the back of a nightclub. He wouldn't go, would he?

Probably, you pissed him off. Hurt his feelings.

But he's my son. It wasn't right.

No, it wasn't right, but that didn't stop you.

…

And you enjoyed it.

…

And now you're thinking about doing it again. You're thinking, if anyone is going to know him like that for the first time, it should be you.

"You okay? You look like you're going to be sick. Maybe you should have stopped earlier, huh?"

I startled away from the argument I was having with myself in my head and tried to focus on What's-His-Name who'd appeared out of nowhere. His face blurred and shifted, and I blinked heavily a few times, trying to clear my vision. It was his mouth I saw first. It was talking. Those thin lips were moving around words I couldn't process. All I could see, all I could understand in my overly drunk state of mind, was how much that mouth, those lips, differed from Creed's.

I scrubbed my face and shook my head—which sent me off kilter again. I caught Stranger's arm and squinted.

He isn't who you want. Admit it. I won't tell anyone.

"I gotta go. Sorry," I slurred, pushing him aside and bullying my way through the congestion.

Outside, the cold night air hit my face and gave me a momentary false sense of sobriety. I inhaled, drawing the refreshing chill into my lungs, begging it to bring my senses online before I did something stupid. For a few minutes, I stayed right there on the street, breathing, not listening to my conscience's betrayal as I tried to remember what hotel I was staying at.

It was after one in the morning. The streets were quieter than they'd been when I'd left earlier. I picked a direction, hoping it was the right one, and stumbled along for a few blocks. Cotton filled my head, dampening sounds and thoughts the farther I went. Finally—I didn't know if it was ten minutes or two hours later—I saw a building that looked familiar.

I rode the elevator, leaning against the back wall with my eyes closed as the ground tilted. When the doors opened, it took me a minute to get my

bearings and walk out. One hand glued to the wall for balance, I shuffled down the hall, room card in hand while I searched for the door whose numbers matched.

It took three tries to get it unlocked, and when it clicked, the green light illuminating, I almost fell through and crashed to the ground before I caught myself on the door handle and wall.

I closed my eyes a second and waited for the spinning to settle. When I opened my eyes again, the room was dark. Only the moonlight coming through the far window allowed me to see where I was going. But there was definitely a small body curled up on the far bed under the covers.

The wave of relief that followed almost bowled me over, and my chest loosened.

He was here. Not out at some random club getting torn apart by a guy three times his size named Moose or Barrel or Tank. I held the wall for balance as I watched him sleep.

Staggering into the room, I ended up beside his bed, and against my sound reasoning, I crawled across the mattress to the far side where he was curled in a ball. I told myself I just needed to see he was okay. Touch him and know he was here and settled and safe.

Creed's words came back to me.

You're such a fucking liar, Dad.

I know.

You liked it!

I did.

You need to chill out.

I can't. Oh, kiddo, I can't, I can't, I can't.

Who was I fooling? Not him. Maybe not even myself.

I brushed his soft hair from his face—hair not crunchy with too much gel. Trailed my nose along his temple. Inhaled. Sighed.

He stirred, rolled his head, and blinked up at me. Those full, beautiful lips I'd been lusting after parted with a gentle intake of air. His eyes widened.

In the morning, I would probably blame the gallons and gallons of alcohol swimming through my veins for what I was about to do, but right now, in this moment, I knew the truth. And I *was* a liar. And I *was* in denial. And I *did* want him.

"Dad?"

“Shh… Just…”

I kissed him. It was sloppy and uncoordinated, but I didn’t care. He groaned into my mouth, lifting his head from the bed, and I slid my tongue against his as I rolled him onto his back. I straddled his smaller frame, pressed him against the bed, and kissed him like I’d wanted to all night.

Regret and guilt and denial and remorse, lies and failure and shame, it all drifted away. None of it mattered. None of it could touch me. I knew it had a lot to do with the dozen or more beers I’d consumed, but I didn’t care.

I broke from his mouth, and he gasped, fingers gripping me so tight he probably feared I’d run again.

Maybe I would in the morning when my senses returned, but not now. Not while this cushion surrounded me. Not while I ached for him with a need I couldn’t describe or explain.

“You’re drunk,” he breathed.

“Yeah. Take it or leave it, kiddo. I’m not sure I can do this any other way.”

“You want me?”

“More than I’ve ever wanted anyone.”

“Dad?”

I nipped his lips, biting the lower one and making him moan as I rutted my hard cock against his. “Yeah, kiddo.”

“Will you fuck me?”

“Try and stop me.”

The world spun and shifted and turned. Up was down, and down was up. Every movement happened in slow motion like the essence of a dream. But it wasn’t a dream, not this time. Our clothes came off easily. Our naked bodies slid and ground against one another. Pleasure rolled off our tongues and danced in the air around us. I shivered.

It was surreal and magical and barely made sense.

Creed wrapped his legs around my waist while he arched off the bed, driving his cum-slicked dick against mine. I grated my teeth down the tender flesh of his neck and over his collarbone, thrusting back against him. I sucked welts and left teeth marks behind, tearing sounds from him that I knew would live in my mind forever.

When he became too eager, his hips thrusting with the irregularity of a person on the cusp of orgasm, I pressed him down against the bed and lifted off him.

Still, the world spun.

He whined and chased after me, but I held him in place, grinning, knowing what he needed.

Then I shoved his thighs up, exposing his ass and that sweet pucker of a hole where I intended to bury myself. *Mine*, I thought. *All mine.*

When I dragged my tongue over his opening, he cried out, legs shaking under my hold, fingers grabbing my hair again. So good.

“Oh God… Dad… Oh fuck…”

“Hold your legs up for me.”

He did, and I showed him no mercy. I showed him what it meant to crave, what it meant to want and need. I made him beg for it. I made him quiver with something so raw and real, he couldn’t understand the roar building in his core. He could only feel it. Embrace it while it grew and grew and grew.

My discarded pants were within reach. Inside the front pocket, I found the small packet of lube I’d taken to the bar with me and tore it open. Coating two fingers, I worked carefully to inch them into his body all while continuing an assault with my tongue. I licked and sucked at the sensitive skin, drawing out his pleasure until he was delirious and thrashing, toes curling.

When I didn’t think he could take it anymore, I found the single condom I’d shoved in that same pocket and climbed up the bed to join our mouths. I would send him soaring. But I’d do it buried in his ass.

We kissed, battling tongues and rutting again as the pleasure ignited and flared.

When I couldn’t take it and needed to be inside him, I broke free and was about to tear into the condom wrapper when he took it from my hand.

“Dad… no.”

I frowned, my processing skills not catching up with his words. No? No what? Was he changing his mind?

He touched my face, grounding me, and shook his head. “Not that. I want this. You. It’s just… Listen.”

Vibrating with the need to keep going, I forced myself to calm a second and nodded for him to continue.

“I’m a virgin. We don’t need this.” He waved the condom at me.

My frown deepened. “But I’m not, kiddo.”

“I know, but I trust you.”

I started to shake my head, but he held my face firm between his hands. “Do you get tested?”

“Of course I do. Regularly.”

“And have you always used condoms before?”

With the exception of his mother, yes. Absolutely. But I knew that wasn’t what he meant. “Yeah,” I choked out.

“Then don’t use it. I want you to fuck me like this. I want you to fill my ass with your cum. I want… I want to feel all of you.”

“Creed. I told you—”

“Use condoms. I know. I listened. But this is different.”

Fuck, was it ever. I didn’t want to go there. I wanted to stay lost in the drunken bliss. I didn’t want to remember why I shouldn’t be doing this. Why it was wrong.

I stared deep into the pools of his eyes, so blue when the sun shone. My heart beat a funny rhythm, knocking triple time and stuttering and racing and stalling.

But we were already lost at sea. The current had taken us away.

“Hold your legs back.”

He did.

I found his already slick entrance with the tip of my cock and dragged it over his sensitive skin a few times as I studied his face. “You sure, kiddo?”

He nodded, biting his lower lip and giving away his nerves. I wouldn’t hurt him. I couldn’t. Never. He was my son. My boy.

I fumbled for the lube packet and dribbled the rest over my length, stroking and coating it thoroughly.

Then I closed my eyes and prayed for forgiveness, because even drunk and lost at sea, I knew what I was about to do was wrong.

But I entered him.

One careful inch at a time as his hot, tight body adjusted to the sensation, pausing when he needed it and holding back all urges to impale him.

He clung, held his breath, squeezed his eyes tight, and tensed. But by the time I bottomed out, he was with me again, staring up with wonder and a sliver of fear in his eyes.

“You okay?” I breathed, not moving, waiting for his cue.

“Yes… Oh… Holy shit, yes. I can’t believe how full I feel.”

“I can’t believe how tight you are.”

His breaths came out staggered, and he dug his fingers into my skin, holding tighter.

“I’m gonna move, kiddo. You ready?”

“Yes.”

I dropped my forehead to his and pulled out a fraction before finding my way home again. It was too good. The building waves of pleasure rocked me forward again and again. His body accepted me. He arched into each thrust, moaning that sweet noise that pulsed right to my dick.

Once I knew he was more comfortable, I angled his legs higher and picked up my pace, slamming into him with more force as I sought his prostate.

He writhed and whimpered, and his nails cut skin as he became lost in his pleasure. Then I found it. The sweet spot I’d been angling for. Creed’s eyes blew wide, his chin dropped, and he cried out, his body stiffening.

“Shit… Shit… Dad… Oh fuck…”

I kept going, nailing him with a jarring force exactly where I knew he needed it. Lifting off enough to get access to his dripping cock, I launched him into a blinding orgasm with only a few strokes.

The kid screamed so fucking loud, I was sure the people on the first floor heard him. He covered himself and me with endless pulses of release as his voice cracked.

I didn’t stop moving. The tight grip his orgasm caused around my dick was deliriously good, and I drove him into the bed faster and harder as I chased my own release, exploding less than a minute later.

Pulse after pulse, I filled his ass with my cum, trembling as I held myself deep inside, giving him all of it.

I was breathless and exhausted. My heart pounded so hard it was probably ten seconds from giving out. I collapsed on top of him, buried my face in his nape and stayed there for a long time. I didn’t want to leave his body. I didn’t want to leave this moment.

When my cock softened and slipped from his warmth, I rolled to the side, trying to focus on the ceiling overhead. It was impossible. Too much swaying and rocking.

I closed my eyes, unsurprised when the world continued to spin. Everything felt heavy and sluggish—my body and mind. It wasn’t long before I drifted away, leaving the room and all thoughts of our activities

behind. Darkness consumed me, and I fell over the edge of unconsciousness before guilt and regret could catch up.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Seventeen
Creed

DAD'S SNORES FILLED the room. It wasn't the low rumble in his chest like before. These were all-out, full-force, drunken snores that vibrated the bed. He was out cold less than five minutes after we finished.

In the morning, the storms would rage.

I snuck out of bed and retreated to the bathroom to clean up. I was a sticky mess from my chin to halfway down my thighs. Under a hot shower, I replayed everything. My ass ached but not as badly as I feared it might, given the force of the fucking I'd just endured. Once Dad had unleashed those doubts and let them fall away, his desire to have me had been powerful and blinding. It was more incredible than every scenario I'd imagined.

Now, I just needed to figure out how to stop him from freaking out in the morning when he was sober and realised what he'd done.

I finished in the shower and wandered naked into the room, searching the floor for the discarded T-shirt I'd been sleeping in for the past few days. When I found it, I tugged it on along with a clean pair of underwear I found in my bag before crawling onto the bed beside Dad.

He hadn't moved. Naked, sprawled on his back, one arm thrust out to the side and the other resting across his torso, I watched him sleep. His cock lay heavy and soft against his thigh and I studied him—*it*—while I could, taking advantage of the moment.

The sight alone made my blood warm again.

His chest had a light covering of hair, dark like on his head. His abdomen, although not sculpted by rigid muscles, was firm and tight. I hadn't inherited a whole lot of his build. I was smaller like my mom, short and unable to build muscles even if I wanted to. His hair was dark. Mine was light. His eyes were brown. Mine were blue. The things we had in common were less noticeable to the average person, but I saw them. We had the same shape of eyes, the same fuller mouth, the same nose. When Dad expressed himself, it was like looking in a mirror. His angry face matched my own. Our laughs were frighteningly similar.

I lay down beside him, inching closer so I could inhale his essence. I wanted to touch him, run my fingers over his stomach. Kiss him again. Curl up in his arms. I didn't do any of those things.

But…

What if this was all I got? What if he woke up and freaked out? He'd yell and tell me I'd lost my mind. He'd call this disgusting and immoral. He'd wrap himself in that curtain of denial once again, and then what? Would he run? Would he leave me behind? Would he stop caring? Start treating me like shit like *they* always did?

This couldn't be it. I wanted so much more. Everything. Every small taste was nothing more than a tease. He gave me an inch, and I wanted a mile. It itched under my skin and pulled in my chest.

Wrong or right, I'd fight for this.

I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to treasure the feel of his hard, warm body beside me. I didn't want to go back to yelling and silence and regret. If I could have held us in this moment, I would have.

But the night deepened, my eyelids grew heavy, and sleep came.

Hours later, the sun blared through the open blinds into our eyes. Someone groaned. Not a pleasant groan but a groan from having drunk too much the night before. A groan of discomfort. A groan of impending regret.

A heavy weight on my stomach made it hard to breathe. When I opened my eyes, I realized Dad had moved in the night. He lay sideways on the bed, his head pillowed on my stomach, my shirt hiked up, and one of his arms was wrapped around my midsection, holding tight like I might escape.

He groaned again and rolled his head, burying his face against my navel. Lips brushed my soft skin, his thumb caressing against my ribs as he inhaled.

Taking a chance, I threaded my fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp as he returned to the world of the living.

Moving again, laying his cheek against my belly, he faced me as he cracked his eyes open to slits, squinting against the assaulting sunlight. He smacked his lips and our eyes locked. He paused and blinked with confusion which shifted to unsure realization.

I could almost hear the ticking countdown to the inevitable explosion.

Five…

Four…

Three…

Two…

One…

I saw the precise moment it all came back to him. His body tensed. His eyes grew wider than his hungover state would normally have allowed. Panic flooded his face.

Before that final piece snapped into place and he could find the strength to run, I caught hold of him, flipped him over and pinned him down with all one hundred and thirty-five pounds of myself. Pathetic. And useless considering he easily outweighed me by fifty or more pounds.

The motion caught him off guard. In fact, for a second, he turned a concerning shade of green, and I feared he was going to throw up. But he didn't launch me off the bed. He didn't move. He held his hands up, submitting as his emotions showed clear. Pain and sadness.

His gaze flashed over my face, anguish pouring off him.

"Creed." He shook his head, the motion slow and showing his defeat. "Creed, I'm so sorry."

"No," I snapped, pressing my hands to his chest and keeping him down. "Not sorry. Do you remember what we did?"

His eyes watered and his lower lip quivered once before he firmed them and nodded, face crumpling.

I lowered my forehead to his. "Do you remember me telling you I wanted it?"

"Yes," he choked.

"Do you remember how good it was?"

He closed his eyes, squeezing them tight as he squirmed with a weak effort to get me to move off him. I stayed, pressing my thighs around his middle.

"It was so good, Dad. It was so, so good."

"Creed," he blubbered, the single word almost wet and desperate. "No, kiddo. No."

"Don't run. Please don't run."

He trembled, and a single tear escaped the corner of his eye. He reached out with shaking hands and carded his fingers through my hair, gripping, tugging, and drawing me down against his chest and into his arms. He vibrated as he buried his face against me, kissing my temple. Inhaling. It was four staggering breaths later when he spoke again.

“I just need a minute. I’m not running. I just… Creed, you need to move off me and let me go right now. I’m not okay. I need… I need to think. Let me think.”

I wrapped both arms around him and clung and clung and clung. I didn’t want him to think. I just wanted him to feel. I wanted him to remember how good it was. How much he’d wanted it too.

“Creed.” He stroked a hand down my back, returning the embrace as he whispered against my ear. “I promise, kiddo. I promise I’m not running.”

Reluctantly, I peeled away from his warm body and sat beside him. He stumbled to his feet, doing all he could to cover his nakedness as he found his clothes. In the end, he grabbed his duffel bag and locked himself in the bathroom.

But the long shower that followed wasn’t enough time to think, apparently. When he finished, he grabbed his wallet, a key card for the room, and left, promising again without meeting my eyes that he’d be back and I shouldn’t worry.

Unfortunately, my anxiety was high. I’d been anticipating his panic all night, and despite knowing it would happen, I wasn’t prepared.

The click of the door resonated with such finality, I lost control of all the order I’d been holding on to over the past few days. The jitters turned to earthquakes, the overlapping thoughts turned to roars. My walls crumbled and everything came at me at once.

I knew what it was like to feel overwhelmed. I’d been battling this kind of shit for as long as I could remember. Toby had taken me far. He’d held my hand and taught me how to manage the best he could without knowing how deep it truly went.

In a flash, the lights in the room were too bright, and every tiny noise was a scream in my ears, shattering my sanity. My skin crawled and itched to the point my clothing felt uncomfortable. It wasn’t one thing or two things I could work through. It was all at once, and it was suffocating.

I had to move. Run. Do something. Anything.

I needed to stop the clutter of noise filling my brain.

Suppress the sensory overload causing me near physical pain.

I couldn’t be still. I felt trapped. Stuck. Anxious.

Scared.

When I couldn’t find my feet, when I couldn’t gain control, it bubbled into anger. Anger at myself for this weakness. At others for ignoring my

pleas for help.

It was an emotional overload.

I snapped my band and scanned the room frantically. The sharp pain didn't register, didn't even break through the chaos of the storm. Nothing realigned. I was too far gone.

I took out my phone and pulled up Toby's number as too many emotions and sensations bowled me over.

It rang and rang and rang…

When his voicemail came on, I screamed through gritted teeth and almost launched my phone at the wall.

Get it out, get it out, get it out.…

Punch the bag, buddy. Let it out until you can talk.

I didn't have a bag, goddammit. I couldn't get it out. It was stuck inside. It hurt. It ate at my brain.

Get it out, get it out, get it out.…

I launched a fist at the wall instead, a poorly controlled shot that hit at an awkward angle, sending a sharp zing of pain up my arm.

It escalated my anger even more.

I dialed Toby again, cradling my hand to my chest while it hummed and throbbed.

"Baranski."

"T-Tob…" I sputtered and snarled when I could barely say his name with clarity. "Toby," I spat with all the effort I could muster.

"CJ? Shit. I need a minute," he barked at someone in the background. "CJ, I'm here. Talk to me. Deep breaths and give me what you can. I'm listening."

"Can't… Too much… It's loud. So… loud. It's…" I dropped to my knees and rested my head against the carpet, squeezing my eyes closed and trying to make the spinning vortex that was my thinking slow down. The words were there but it was like someone had shaken them up and tossed them all out of order, and I couldn't put them together again.

"It's too loud. I understand. Too much racing right now. Am I right? Give me one word, buddy. A yes or no. That's all I need."

"Yes," I gritted between teeth.

"Okay. Okay, I hear you. I'm gonna talk. I know you can't get the words out and that's really frustrating, but it's temporary. Do you hear me? You got yourself overloaded. Deep breaths. CJ, I'm going to ask you some

important questions. You just need to try and give me yes or no answers. I'm sorry I have to do this, but it's important. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Is your dad there right now? Is he near you?"

"No."

"Are you somewhere safe?"

"Yes."

There was an extended pause. "CJ, did something happen to you? Something I need to know about?"

Yes, I wanted to scream. *But it's not what you think. It's not bad even though he thinks it's bad. Even though he's gone to think about it and conclude that I can't be part of his life. He's going to call it wrong or dirty, he's going to tell me it can't continue. But it's not wrong. It's the opposite of wrong. It feels so good and so right and like the part of me that's been missing for ten years has finally been found. I used to dream about him. He was my savior, my hero. I'd fantasize about him rescuing me from all the shit in my life. He'd protect me and love me and listen to me. And I've found him, and I've been given those things on a level I never dreamed. Why does it matter? Why do we have rules and limits? Why can't I love him wholly and completely, physically and emotionally? Why, goddammit, why, why, why?*

I saw all the things I couldn't say. They were a sputtering of truths just out of reach. But the wires were all broken.

"CJ, you've got to give me something. You're scaring me. Did he do something to you? Did he hurt you?"

I couldn't tell Toby the truth. Not any of it—and not because I couldn't speak at the moment but because I'd promised.

"N-No. He… No. Just… racing."

"Are you sure?"

I growled and Toby shushed me. "Okay, I hear you. No. He didn't do anything. You understand why I asked, though. I have to. Where are you?"

"Hotel."

"In Winnipeg?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone in the room?"

"Yes."

“I want you to close your eyes if they aren’t already. Think for me as best you can. Is there a gym in the hotel? Somewhere you can go and expel all this. You have to get it out.”

Get it out, get it out, get it out…

Punch the bag until you can talk, buddy.

As I dug through the fragments of thoughts in my head, trying to find an answer, the door to the room opened, and Dad came through.

I peered up from where I was curled in on myself on the ground and the look on my face must have been telling. Dad’s eyes went wide, and he ran, dropping to my side and peeling the phone out of my hand.

“T-Toby,” I tried to explain. “Didn’t tell him… Promise… Needed… Was racing… Can’t… make it stop.”

He put the phone to his ear, his eyes never leaving mine. “Is this Toby? Yeah, Rhyker, his father… No idea. I took a walk and came back to this… It’s been a rocky reunion. It’d be overwhelming for anybody… Yeah. When he calms down… Okay. Yup.”

He hung up and tossed the phone on the bed we hadn’t used last night then he pulled me off the floor into his arms. They circled me, surrounded me, enveloped me, forced all the fractured pieces back where they belonged. I buried my face in his chest and we both waited until order returned.

I closed my eyes against the harsh lights, covered my ears against the blaring noises all around me—the ones that weren’t really blaring. And I waited. Breathed.

Weakness was embarrassing. After things began to settle, I pulled away, stood, and paced while snapping my band. Dad sat on the edge of the bed and watched me, never taking his eyes off me for a second.

“It will get better. When we get back, you’ll see the doctor. It doesn’t have to be this way, Creed. I hate that you’ve been suffering like this for so long.”

My knuckles felt stiff on the hand I’d used to abuse the wall. I flexed and unflexed those fingers as I finally stilled.

Dad wasn’t gone. After everything, he hadn’t run. He’d come back and continued to support me. There was no ridicule. He didn’t tell me I was lying or faking. He accepted. Embraced. Understood.

Our eyes met and a trickle of fear returned because this—whatever it was—was fragile and I knew it.

“Dad.” I swallowed a tight lump and made sure my head was working right before continuing. “It doesn’t have to be wrong. You don’t have to feel guilt or regret. It was good. So, so good. I wanted it. We can do this without anyone—”

“Creed.” He stood and approached me. Without touching, he pinned me in place with a look. “We are gonna push that aside right now. For both our sakes. We *will* talk about it. We have to. Things have to be said. But right now, let’s get you back to Peterborough and get you to the doctor. I can’t stand to see you suffer.”

“I’ve been like this all my life. A few days won’t make a difference, Dad. Tell me it will be okay with us. Tell me you want it too.”

His gaze was heavy. Penetrating. I couldn’t read his thoughts, but I saw a hint of desire burn behind his eyes for a minute before it went away again.

“I’m not discussing this right now. I don’t think I can yet. I need time.”

I closed our distance and tugged his face down, joining our mouths before he could think to protest. I dug fingers into his beard and licked along the seam of his lips, begging for entrance. He resisted, then caved. His lips parted, his tongue swept over mine, and he groaned. For a moment, his hands came up and rested against my sides, pulling me closer.

Then it stopped. Like he realized what he was doing, he grabbed my shoulders and pushed me away with a growl.

“No. Creed, stop. Shit.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “We… I can’t… *We*… I’m not discussing this until I’ve had time to process and know how to handle it.”

“You were handling it just fine right now. Maybe you’re overthinking. Maybe—”

“No.” His voice was surprisingly gentle and not angry. “No. Creed…” He cupped my face with one hand, stroking a thumb tenderly over my cheek. There was that look in his eyes again. He was torn. Unsure. Wanting, yet too afraid to take. “Shit, Creed.” He shook his head.

“Dad.”

“Let’s head home. No more pushing. Let it go for now. Please.”

Knowing I was on the verge of making him angry, I nodded.

We packed up our things and were on the road by noon.

He stood his ground.

There might not have been the same eerie, angry silence between us like the trip to Winnipeg, but there was tension. Lots of tension.

We talked. A lot. About trivial things and life things. Dad didn't allow me to bring up our night in Winnipeg at all. Or our little adventure in the cab of the truck on the side of the road. They were off limits. When I tried, he shook his head and refused to indulge in the conversation. I saw the uncertainty in his eyes. The way his mouth pulled tight when he was thinking about it. The weight that sat on his shoulders.

I lay awake at night in our shared hotel room and wondered what the following days would bring. The second night on the road, I tried to sneak into his bed after he'd fallen asleep. He woke and sent me back to my own.

"Please," he begged. "Not now. Let me think."

Back in Peterborough, Dad was all business. He called the doctor again and convinced the man to rearrange his schedule so he could see me the day after we returned. Then Dad escaped the house, staying away long hours, telling me he had things to do at work.

My appointment went well. It was enlightening to find out my struggles had explanations. The doctor and I talked for ages about all the things I experienced in a given day. We discussed school, my home life, and my reactions to certain stimuli. I told him about the classes Toby had taken me to and the band on my wrist. I explained about my anger and my inability to express myself when I got worked up. Everything. In the end, he prescribed two different medications for me to take. One to be taken daily, the other only if things got too far out of hand and I needed help coming down again.

I promised to take them religiously.

At the house, I slept on Dad's couch.

He was there, but he wasn't.

We talked little, and I could see the inner war he fought when it came to him and me.

A week after we got home, Dad had to go on the road again. That time, I wasn't invited.

"How long?"

"Two days. It's an overnight trip. Not a big deal. I'll leave before you're up tomorrow and be back the following night. You'll be fine."

But it felt off. Wrong somehow. Like he was escaping me. Us. Unable or unwilling to face it. He still hadn't *talked* about it. He still maintained a distance. How many days, weeks, months would this avoidance last?

"Why can't I come?"

“It’s my job. You can’t follow me around all the time. Maybe take this opportunity to decide what you want to be doing. You’re an adult. You must have aspirations. Goals. Ones I’m sure didn’t include sleeping on your dad’s couch. Is this where you want to be? Peterborough? You could go anywhere. Do anything.”

“You want me to leave?”

“I didn’t say that.” He sighed and scanned the living room. “Look, it’s after ten. I need to crash. I gotta be up early. I’ll try not to wake you.”

He left me standing there with a hollow ache in my chest. It didn’t feel good. He was shutting me out. Pushing me away. Avoiding the inevitable pull that kept tugging us together. Why was he so resistant?

For a long time, I sat on the couch with a blanket around my shoulders, surrounded by Dad’s oversized T-shirt and his scent.

The house was quiet. Too quiet. My skin itched and buzzed.

I was cold and unsettled. My head raced and raced, and I knew sleep would be a long way off.

It was midnight, then one, then two in the morning.

I couldn’t take it anymore. If he left tomorrow, he might convince himself what he felt wasn’t real. The wall he was building around his emotions would grow taller, more solid. What then?

I was off the couch and down the hall, edging his bedroom door open before I could think about what I was doing. The chances of him turning me away were high. The chances of him getting angry were even higher. He’d done it already on the road home from Winnipeg. Refused to let me in. Shuttered his emotions and feelings and needs like they didn’t exist.

His room was dark. The blinds were shut, keeping the streetlight and moonlight at bay. It was all shadowed, and I took a minute to let my eyes adjust. Dad slept on his back, covers drawn to his waist, bare-chested, and God only knew what he wore under those blankets.

His even breathing filled the room.

On soft feet, I inched toward the bed. A familiar seed of warmth took over my belly and raced through my veins. I knelt on the edge of the mattress and crawled toward him. He didn’t react.

His face was slack and lips slightly parted. Bigger than me. Hairier than me. More muscular than me. A protector. A hero who used to play an active role in my mind as a teenager, swooping in and rescuing me from my

shitty existence. Saving me and taking me away. In my dreams, he loved me. He cherished me. He took care of me. He was everything.

But Dad was real and I'd found him, and he could be everything and more now if he'd only let it happen.

I drew his covers lower, sliding them down his hips and thighs, revealing a simple pair of tight briefs with a distinctive mound in the front I'd seen and tasted and had inside me.

The action made him stir, and he rolled his head to the other side, mumbling once but continuing to sleep.

My cock swelled, and I tugged my underwear down and off, dropping them over the edge of the bed. Wearing only his T-shirt, I crawled up the bed farther and dug quietly through his bedside table until I found a bottle of lube.

I popped the cap and poured some in my hand, slicking it over my fingers and making them good and wet. On my knees, I watched Dad sleep as I pressed two fingers inside me, biting my lip against the sting as I worked myself open. It felt good. But it was the part that came after I craved again.

I found my prostate and paid it attention, my dick swelling and twitching. A tiny moan escaped my lips before I could bite it back, and Dad stirred again.

He was about to shuffle to his side when his arm knocked into me and his eyes opened. There was a flash of confusion before he raked his gaze over my body. His attention lingered on my hard cock, so I took his hand and brought it to my erection.

He resisted and tensed, so I bent down and kissed him, whispering against his mouth, "Just pretend this is all a dream if it helps. I know you want me, Dad. I know it. I see it. I feel it."

His eyes shuttered closed, and he kissed me again, tongue grazing mine. When we broke apart, I guided his hand once again to my cock. He no longer resisted. Together, his hand under mine, we stroked. His lips parted with his unsteady breathing, and I watched his underwear grow tight, his dick grow hard.

When I couldn't take it anymore and was sure I was stretched enough, I removed his underwear and straddled him.

He stopped stroking me and brought his hands to my waist as I rocked my lube-slicked ass over his erection a few times, reveling in the friction.

He looked torn and resigned at the same time. Each motion, each drag of my ass over his dick made him tremble. Before he could protest, I took him in hand and guided him to my entrance.

“Wait.” His voice was hoarse, strained, choked.

I was about to hush him, certain those protests were rising, when he reached for the lube and filled his palm. He stroked himself, coating his erection with far more lube than was probably necessary. Then he rubbed the tip of his cock over my entrance, held it in place, and nodded for me to continue.

I braced myself on his chest and closed my eyes as I sat back on him, feeling every inch as he entered my body.

“Fuck,” he moaned when I was fully seated. “Jesus fuck. This is too much. So fucking good.”

He wrenched his head back but wouldn’t open his eyes. Not at first. Like maybe he was denying himself the truth. If he didn’t look at me, then I could be anyone.

When I was past the initial discomfort, I started to move. Rocking and gyrating my hips, lifting and lowering. Plunging deeper. His fingers dug into my sides almost painfully. I didn’t care. It was everything. Bursts of light shattered across my vision as waves of building pleasure rolled through me.

Faster. Sending him deeper. Harder.

I panted, whimpering at how good it was, how much I wanted and needed this.

Then it happened.

Acknowledgement.

Acceptance.

Dad opened his eyes and watched me move. Like I was an impossibility. An illusion.

“Creed,” he whispered. Begged. “Ah fuck… So good… Creed…”

He planted his feet on the bed and thrust deeper, eyes fluttering closed once more before he tugged me down and kissed me. It was brutal and desperate, his tongue stabbing and seeking. He grabbed two fistfuls of my hair and held me there as he abused my mouth and sucked my tongue and drove deeper into my body than I thought possible.

Slapping skin resonated through the air. Gasps, pants, moans.

He was sober this time and just as willing. More. I wasn’t imagining things. He was right there with me. Clinging to this moment.

Savoring.

Devouring.

“Creed,” he moaned into my mouth. “Creed… Fuck… Jesus…”

His thrusts grew impossibly faster and harder, nearly out of sync. He vibrated and kissed me as he fucked me with determination.

“Gonna… Oh shit…”

Then he roared, pressing himself deep and filling me as his body tensed with the sheer power of his release. I felt every pulse from the inside out. It went on and on.

When it subsided, he rolled us so he was on top and drew my legs higher as he fucked me into the bed, pistoning his hips faster and faster. Stroking me and sending me into space with a mind-shattering orgasm.

I was without words, crying out as my world exploded into stars.

I’d never experienced anything so powerful.

Limp and exhausted, I stared up at him in awe. My dad. My hero. My everything.

Coming down from such a high, I feared what he’d say. What he’d do. But he said nothing. He tore the shirt I still wore—his shirt—over my head and used it to clean us up. Then he pulled me into his arms and held me in a vise grip, kissing over my shoulders, nuzzling my neck, touching me like I was something precious. He dragged his nose over my skin and breathed me in, humming with pleasure.

It was warm in his arms. Safe. We fell asleep like that.

In the morning when I woke, he was gone.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eighteen
Rhyker

I WAS RUNNING. There was no doubt in my mind. I was hightailing it like my ass was on fire and there was a hungry mob of rabid lions closing in on me. There was no way I should have been driving when I was this shaken. But staying home wasn't an option.

I was scared. There were no two ways about it. What was happening between Creed and me terrified me to the bone, but I couldn't seem to stop it or get a hold of it.

I hadn't turned him away. *Again.* I'd willingly waved the white flag and succumbed to all my suppressed desires.

He knew. The kid saw through me. He saw everything I couldn't say.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter, straining my joints as my eighteen-wheeler ate up the road. The radio blared—an attempt at distracting my mind—but it wasn't working. All I could see, taste, hear, and smell was him.

My son.

My goddamn son!

I wanted to drive to the nearest police station and tell them to lock me up. Horrendous didn't even begin to describe my actions. What kind of a father was I? What was wrong with me?

I blew out a shaky breath and filled my lungs again, the wheeze in my chest more pronounced. My vision narrowed with each failed attempt to breathe. It was like sucking through a straw, and I grew hazy the more I focused on what had happened.

I'd never had a panic attack a day in my life, but that was where I was headed.

I couldn't drive. I needed to pull over somewhere. Get a grip.

I found a truck stop just off the highway and parked. There was a diner, a gas station, and down the road farther, a small motel. Otherwise, there was nothing else for miles. It was only noon, but I considered getting a room for the night because I couldn't go on.

If I didn’t get myself under control, this whole trip would take twice as long as it was supposed to take. Without leaving my truck, I closed my eyes and laid my head back, rolling every angle of the situation around my mind, looking for a solution. Searching for answers. Trying desperately not to allow that yearning, aching need back to the surface.

He couldn’t keep staying with me. Although I’d told him he could, and as much as I didn’t want to throw him out, it was too dangerous. My self-control depleted in his presence. He was like a drug. I couldn’t say no. I craved more each time. One taste and I was fucking ruined.

But if I sent him packing, where would he go? What would he do? What would become of him? Us? Would I lose my son all over again?

His mother was a hot mess and always had been. His grandparents sounded like they’d turned cruel. This friend, this Toby guy, had a life and didn’t need the responsibility of a kid who wasn’t his.

Creed needed guidance and love. He needed kindness and patience. All the things I’d once been for him. All the things I wanted to be again. Except we’d fallen into the deep end, and I’d be damned if I would continue to swim in these shark-infested waters.

I would not allow myself to crave him. To want him. To keep going back. I couldn’t—even if on a subconscious level, I wanted to.

Stop it!

It was wrong. It was *illegal*. It had to stop. For his safety and my own.

When I got back, I’d tell him how it had to be. If he wanted, I would help him find work and a place of his own. Once he was on his feet and not under my roof, maybe then we could find the proper balance of father and son like we should have done from the beginning.

I could support him as he came to understand his ADHD and SPD on a new level. We could do normal father and son things like go to sporting events, have BBQs, rebuild a car.

Not have sex!

I took a room at the motel down the road.

For hours that night, I lay awake playing out the conversation I had to have with Creed in my head. It was going to be ugly, it was probably going to set him off, but it was inevitable. I needed to put my foot down. Make it stick. Ensure he understood.

I WAS A DAY late returning to Peterborough. When I unlocked the door to my third-story apartment in the old home, I listened for any signs of Creed. The house was quiet. It was dinner time and he could have easily decided to venture out.

I left my bag of dirty clothes in the laundry room and poked my head in the kitchen. Not finding him, I called out, “Creed? You home?”

No response.

I wandered down the hallway to my bedroom and found him fast asleep on top of the covers, wearing another one of my old baggy T-shirts, his legs drawn up and tucked inside.

My heart skipped at the sight of him all curled up and peaceful. A man, yet still a kid on so many levels. Nineteen. He was only nineteen.

This world was too big for him to take on yet. Especially solo. He’d struggled with an unstable life thus far. The urge to protect him and keep him safe overruled me almost to the point I wanted to change my mind about my decision.

His blond bangs covered one eye, and those long, delicate lashes rested against his milky pale cheeks. He was almost angelic, lying in the middle of my big bed, dead to the world. I didn’t want to wake him, so I closed the bedroom door and returned to the other end of the house.

I made food—grilled cheese and tomato soup—and flicked on the TV while I ate. Midway through the second episode of some sitcom I’d never seen before, Creed came from the bedroom, bleary-eyed, shirt wrinkled, and hair a sleep-matted mess. There were pillow creases on one of his cheeks, too.

Another pinch in my chest. Another ache deep in my core.

“You’re home,” he said through a yawn as he stretched his arms in the air, lifting the shirt high enough to expose the tight pair of underwear he had on underneath.

My gaze automatically drifted down his body, lingering places it shouldn’t. It was a sign that I needed to take action before it was too late.

It’s already too late. You already don’t want to let him go. Admit it.

He called to me on a subconscious level. My body rumbled and responded and yearned for him the minute he stood before me. I was too weak. Unable to resist. Too addicted to what we’d shared.

“Got in a few hours ago. You were asleep. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Haven’t slept well since you left. Too much racing.”

“Are you taking your pills?”

He nodded.

“They will take time to get into your system, but you’ll feel a difference. I promise.”

He stood in place, hesitating for a long minute before shuffling forward and sitting beside me on the couch. Close. Closer than I wanted. I could smell him. Feel the warmth of his body radiating outward. He edged closer and leaned his head on my shoulder, resting one hand gently on my thigh.

My skin tingled with the contact.

I blew out a breath and turned toward him, removing the hand and keeping space between us.

“Creed, it’s time we talk about this.”

His teeth found his lip as he watched me warily. “Okay.”

“What happened between us—”

“I won’t tell anyone. I swear it. I know it’s dangerous. Illegal. I know it is, but I don’t want it to stop. Dad, please. It’s incredible. It’s everything. When you were gone, I—”

“Creed.” I placed a hand on his bouncing leg. “Let me talk, kiddo. Okay? I have some stuff I need to get out.”

He nodded.

Where to start? I’d thought of a million different ways to say this but still didn’t have a clue. So I opened my mouth and let my heart guide me.

“When I found out you were going to be born, I was angry. Pissed off at the world. I was fifteen and scared and just coming to terms with my sexuality. The last thing I wanted was to be a parent. I didn’t even like your mother. She was a random, drunken experiment at a party. And I’m sorry if that hurts to hear, but it’s the truth.”

His face fell, and I took his hand, squeezing. “Don’t freak out. I’m being one hundred percent transparent with you. It’s important. Please listen. I didn’t want her to be pregnant, it’s true. But the day I went to the ultrasound appointment with your mom, everything changed. When I saw you on the screen, it took my breath away. You had little arms and little legs already. A tiny little nose, lips, ears. A heart that beat so strong. You moved around and kicked, and you were alive in there. I made you. You were mine. That was the day it all became real for me. You became real.

“They gave me a picture to take home. I kept it with me all the time and stared at it. I promised myself on that day, I would be the best damn

father I could be, despite being fifteen. I went out and got a job. I stopped doing drugs—yes, don't look at me like that. I wasn't perfect. I paid more attention in school. I read all there was to read about raising a kid. I grew up. Everything I did, I did it for you. It was all for you."

His chin fell to his chest like he knew where I was going with this. I tilted his head up, smoothed my knuckles over his cheek and closed my eyes as the pull to him grew stronger.

"When you were born, it was indescribable. They put this tiny bundle into my arms, and when you looked into my eyes for the first time, my heart… It didn't know love like that. You became the center of my world. I worked two and three jobs at a time to help support you. You were my little man. We did everything together. I wanted to give you all the experiences in the world. Show you everything. Teach you everything. When you struggled, and it happened early on, I wanted nothing more than to shelter you in my arms and make it better. Take away your pain. Protect you. Keep you safe."

"Then they took me away."

I nodded. "Yes. And for ten years my heart was shattered. You have no idea the pain I felt. The agony of losing a son. You were out there somewhere, but I couldn't find you. Nothing mattered after that. Nothing. I floundered. I couldn't keep a job. I couldn't keep a man. I hated everything and everyone. I drank too much. Fucked around too much. Just didn't care.

"I told myself all the time, if I ever saw you again, I'd never let you go. I would do *everything* for you. I'd make up for our lost years. I would love you and cherish you and show you anything you wanted to know about the world. Never again would I lose you. Never again would someone take you away."

A single tear leaked from his eye, and I caught it on my thumb and wiped it away.

"You're sending me away, aren't you?"

"Never."

He peered up, so much hope in his eyes, my heart ached.

"I love you, Creed. I still want to be your father. I still want to show you the world and have you in my life, but…" I swallowed and shook my head. "But the lines are so fucking blurred right now, and what you want and what you think you need from me, I *can't* give you."

"But—"

“Shh… I can’t.” I lowered my voice to a whisper and leaned my head against his. My chest hurt something fierce. “But I want to, Creed,” I said truthfully. “I want to. You’re like an addiction. Every time I touch you, I want more. Every time I taste these lips, it’s never enough. I took something from you that wasn’t mine to take. I’ve done things with you no father should ever do. I can’t say no to you, because when I do, I’m lying to myself as well. Because I want you so fucking badly. I ache with it. I need it. You.”

“Dad. Please.”

I closed my eyes and tugged him against my chest, smothering him in a tight hug. I stroked his hair and kissed his head. Inhaled him. “We *need* to draw the line, kiddo. We *need* some element of separation so we can get past this… Or it will all come crashing down on us. And that scares me.”

“You *are* sending me away.”

“Only because I don’t know how else to make it stick. Not because I want you gone. Not because I don’t love you. Creed, you have to understand.”

He fought to get out of my hold and shot off the couch. “But you want it too. You just said you want it too.” His voice trembled as he grew more agitated. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Creed. Sit down and let’s talk it through.”

“No. Are you sending me back to her? Them? How is that better? Do you know what that was like?”

“I’m not. I wouldn’t. We can find you work here and an apartment or somewhere to room and board. You don’t need to go far.”

“But I need to go.” He shook his head, resigned. He snapped his rubber band and spun. Paced. “You… How can you… I was there.” He flung an arm toward the bedroom. “You wanted it… I felt… The way you… Dad, please.”

It was all true. Every last piece of it.

But I *couldn’t* be anything more than a father to him. It *had* to be over.

“I want it. Dad, it doesn’t scare me.”

“But it scares *me*, Creed. It terrifies me. I shouldn’t feel this way.” I stood and approached him, stilling the abuse he was giving his wrist. “If we’re caught, if anyone found out, I wouldn’t care what happened to me. Do you understand that? But you… I can’t do that to you. The consequences. You’re too young to make these decisions.”

“Are you saying if I was older, you’d go along with it? That it would be different?”

“No. I’d tell you the same thing.”

“This is bullshit,” he yelled. “I can’t believe…” He growled and ripped his hands through his hair. “You’re just lying to yourself. I’m nineteen. I’m an adult. If I want to risk it, then why not?”

I closed my eyes and prayed for strength.

“Creed. No. I’m sorry, but I have to stand my ground. I’m not changing my mind.”

The hurt and betrayal that crossed his face cut me deep. “Then fuck you,” he hollered. “I wish I’d never found you.”

He stormed to his bag, wrenched new clothing from inside and tore the T-shirt—my T-shirt—over his head before chucking it at me. Then he dressed and was out the door, slamming it behind him. The finality of that slam resonated around the now quiet house, and I stood there a long time, staring at the closed door, wondering if I’d done the right thing.

He was still so young. Those were teenage hormones ravishing his system. He was angry now, but he’d cool off. He’d come back, and we could sort this out. I didn’t want to abandon him. He was my son, and I meant every word I said. I’d do anything for him.

Anything.

Except that. *That*, I couldn’t do.

Hours passed. Night fell outside. Creed didn’t come back.

He didn’t return the next day either.

Or the following.

It was the fourth day when I started to worry. I didn’t know where he’d gone. He hadn’t called or texted. It was radio silence, and I second-guessed myself again and again.

On the fifth day with no word, I called his phone and got his voicemail. I didn’t know what more I could say, so I hung up.

This was for the best, I told myself. We needed space.

He knew where I was and what I could offer him. When he was ready, he’d reach out again.

Will he? You crushed him.

I had to stay strong in my decision. What had happened wasn’t healthy. It wasn’t right.

Then why, deep down, didn’t I believe it anymore?

Why did my chest ache? Why did this weight continue to sit on my shoulders every day, suffocating me and reminding me what I'd had and lost?

He was my son.

But he'd become more. So much more.

The craving never left.

Not after a week.

Not after two weeks.

Not after a month.

It grew. Festered. Bled through my veins.

The ground under my feet grew shakier day by day.

I started to question my morals. Started to wonder…

… what if?

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Nineteen
Creed

I'D LEFT DAD'S house two days ago. At first, I hadn't known where to go or what to do. I'd wandered the dark streets of Peterborough all that first night in a daze. Hurt. Sad. Angry. Frustrated.

It had been cold, but with no money left to get a hotel or food, I'd walked and walked and walked. When dawn came, I'd found myself at the same diner Dad had taken me to on the first day I'd arrived. Milly had been working—I'd seen her through the window—so I hadn't gone in. I didn't know if she'd call Dad and tell him where I was or how close their friendship was.

Instead, I'd hung out in the parking lot, staying hidden behind the dumpster in the back as I'd waited for a trucker to pull in for breakfast. It hadn't taken long. The place was a frequented rest stop.

I'd bummed a ride heading east with the first willing man heading that way.

That evening, at a desolate truck stop far from Peterborough, I'd hitched a ride with another trucker heading in the same direction.

I'd taken one ride after another until I'd found my way back to Saint John. The truckers hadn't asked questions. They'd been mostly happy for the company and had taken pity on me, giving me food they had stashed in their trucks. Granola bars, cans of Coke, bags of chips, crackers, gummy bears. It had been enough to fill the void.

On the second day, at the ass-crack of dawn, I landed on Toby's doorstep. The sun had yet to rise, and the horizon was only just starting to lighten. My breath frosted in the air, and I shivered as I bounced on my toes, anxious about being back in Saint John and unsure if he'd take me in.

Toby's SUV was in the driveway, and the lights inside his house were out. According to my phone, it was shortly after five in the morning. If he was working the day shift, he wouldn't be getting up for another couple of hours. If it was the night shift, his car wouldn't have been there because he wouldn't have been home yet.

If it was his day off, he might be pissed at the early wake-up call.

I knocked loudly before hiking my backpack up my shoulder higher.

There was no response, so I knocked again. Louder and for longer.

I didn't want to go to Mom's or my grandparents'. Not once had they tried contacting me since I'd left. They'd proven they didn't care. I could imagine the shitstorm I'd have to deal with if I went home.

After a third round of knocking, a light came on inside and someone—hopefully Toby and not his annoying girlfriend—unlocked the door. It edged open slowly, cautiously, revealing my cop best friend who was on full alert. His stance and the fact that he probably had a gun within reach ready to take out the intruder made me smile and shake my head.

He squinted out the door, confusion written all over his face. I'd pulled him from bed and he wore only boxers and a wrinkled T-shirt.

"CJ?" His voice was gruff and tired sounding.

"Were you getting ready to take me out? Throw me down and stick a gun to the back of my head?"

I wasn't funny.

"What are you doing here?"

"Do robbers and murderers knock? Really?"

His stance relaxed, and he pulled the door all the way open, scanning me and ignoring my rambling. He saw through me right to my jittery nerves. "Creed, what's going on? It's five in the morning. I thought you were in Peterborough."

I heaved a sigh and stared at my feet. "I ran away. Again."

"I'm sensing a pattern. Well, don't just stand there. It's fucking cold. Get in here."

I followed Toby into the kitchen. It had been remodeled recently and sported brilliant white cabinetry and marble countertops. I sat on a stool at the island as he rummaged through a cupboard and pulled out stuff to make coffee.

"Do you work today?" I asked.

"Yup. Not until ten. Should I call in and tell them I'm going to be late?"

"No." I traced a darker swirl in the marble surface and hedged, unsure how to explain my presence.

Toby set the coffee pot to brew and folded his arms over his chest, facing me, leaning against the counter. "Are you in trouble?" he asked, scanning me.

“No.”

“Did something happen?”

I pinched my lips together, wanting to say yes but knowing I’d need to explain. “No.”

“CJ, the truth.”

I’d pondered too long. “Nothing *bad* happened.”

“Then why are you here?”

“He… He didn’t want me there anymore.”

“Why?”

I didn’t want to answer that, so I looked everywhere but at Toby and shrugged. “Don’t know. I guess I’m not who he wants.”

It was as much of the truth as I could share, and it stung.

Toby did the cop-stare thing. Hard eyes pinned me in place while he all but stripped me down and dissected me, looking for the things I wasn’t saying. A moment later, he shoved away from the counter and rounded the island. Spinning me on the stool, he took my chin and forced me to meet his eyes.

“You’re lying to me. I’ve known you long enough not to fall for this shit. Now tell me what happened. The truth, because right now I’m ten seconds from making calls and having his ass arrested. Something is not sitting right.”

“You can’t arrest him for nothing.”

“I can have him brought in under suspicion of assault or whatever my mind decides to go with until you tell me what happened.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because you wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

I sighed and pushed his hand away. “I’m tired and I don’t want to talk about it. Can we please just put it on hold for now?”

I shifted my gaze over his face, begging with my eyes. The creases of concern on Toby’s forehead didn’t lessen, but he stepped back.

“You’re scaring me.”

“He didn’t hurt me. Not how you think. It’s just… something else. Something I don’t want to talk about right now.”

Toby sighed. It was heavy and resigned. “Fine. Not right now. But this isn’t over. And God help me, if he did anything to you—”

“Toby.”

“All right.” He rubbed the back of his neck and frowned as he scanned the kitchen. “How did you get here, anyway?”

I winced, knowing I was going to get an earful for this part too. “I hitched rides.”

“Jesus fucking… CJ, we talked about this.”

“I know, but I didn’t have a choice.”

“You could have called me. I’d have found a way to help you out.”

“You already gave me five hundred bucks. I wasn’t going to crawl back to you and ask for more. It was no big deal. I’m fine. Nothing happened.”

“That’s not the point. Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? You could have been hurt or raped or killed. I’ve seen it before. More times than you’d believe. It’s not safe.”

I dropped my head into my hands and growled. “I know. I had to leave, okay? I was angry. I wasn’t thinking straight. Everything was a mess, and I just needed to go.”

My insides vibrated and I didn’t realize how loudly we’d been yelling until Jessica appeared in the doorway to the kitchen.

“What is he doing here?”

I lifted my head and groaned. Sliding off the stool, I went to escape the kitchen when Toby caught my arm.

“Jess, go back to bed, it doesn’t concern you.”

“There is a kid yelling in the kitchen at five in the morning and it doesn’t concern me?”

“No,” we both said simultaneously.

“Tobias, a word,” she snapped.

“Not now. Go back to bed while I handle this.”

She made a face that made her look like she’d been sucking on a lemon and flung her black curls over her shoulder before strutting away.

“Your girlfriend is a bitch.”

“Watch your fucking mouth, buddy. By the look of things, I’m the only person standing between you and street living right now.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, not really feeling it.

“Now look. I don’t have a spare room. We’ve talked about this. All I have is a couch. I’ll get you some blankets and a pillow because you look exhausted. Sleep. Help yourself to whatever is in the fridge. When I get

home tonight, we're having a long talk. Everything is going on the table. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Good." There was an extended pause. It went on long enough, I looked up and met Toby's hard glare. "We'll figure this out. I promise. One way or another, I'm not abandoning you. I'm not like them, CJ. But respect goes both ways. You get me?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"I know. You're agitated. I can tell. Give me a minute to get you some bedding."

He disappeared into the other side of the house, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Could I tell him? Should I? I'd promised Dad I wouldn't tell anyone. But that was before he'd shoved me out of his life.

I didn't know what to do or where to go.

I was tired. So, so tired.

Toby set me up in the living room on the couch. I settled in and was out cold in minutes. I didn't hear him get ready for work and leave. I didn't hear Jessica leave either, but when I woke in the middle of the afternoon, they were both gone.

I took a long shower, made food, and was lounging on Toby's couch watching TV when he got home at eight that night.

I shuffled up on the couch and crossed my legs as he came into the living room still wearing his uniform. He held himself with that intimidating cop posture he adopted when on duty as he studied me. His face was unreadable, so I waited. Toby was in great shape and wore his uniform well, muscles all bulging and threatening. No wonder no one fucked with the guy. It had nothing to do with the gun and badge.

"You eat?" he finally asked.

"Yeah. Around three."

"Hungry?"

I nodded.

"I'm gonna clean up. Order a pizza and we'll chat."

No nonsense. No room for arguing. He wasn't asking a question. He was informing me of the progression of our night, in case I'd forgotten.

"Okay." He started to walk away when I asked, "Is Jessica coming back?"

He stiffened but didn't turn around. "No. It'll just be us."

“Okay.”

I wondered if they’d talked or fought. It wouldn’t be the first time Jessica spazzed over me being around.

I ordered pizza while he showered, and for the one hundred and eighty millionth time, I considered what I was going to say to Toby when he asked.

He didn’t come out of his room until someone knocked at the door. Dressed in jogging pants and a tight T-shirt, with bare feet and damp hair, he wandered into the living room and threw two twenties on the coffee table.

“Get the door. I’ll get some plates.”

I gathered the money and did as I was told. With a steaming box of an extra-large deluxe pizza from Toby’s favorite place in hand, I entered the kitchen and found him seated at the island, texting. Plates, napkins, and two beers sat in front of him.

I set the pizza down and helped myself to a few slices while I eyed him.

Frowning, with lips in a firm line and brows pinched, he typed away without acknowledging my presence. There was a pause while he waited for whoever it was to respond.

I nibbled the tip of my first slice, trying not to be nosy but feeling curious.

The person must have answered because Toby’s gaze skipped over the message as he read it. He snarled and slammed his phone facedown on the island beside him, shoving it away as he muttered, “For fuck’s sake, woman.” Then he tore three slices from the box and dropped them on a plate.

He didn’t eat right away. He slid one of the beers closer, twisted the cap off, and drank down a few hefty mouthfuls as he eyed me. It was daunting, that stare he had. I knew Toby well and it came with the job, but when it was turned on me, I got nervous. It reminded me a lot of the first few times I’d met him before we’d become friends.

When he put his beer down, there was an air of expectancy surrounding us. Like he was ready to hear whatever it was I had to say and was done beating around the bush.

“Can we eat first?” I asked.

His shoulders sagged, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yeah. Sorry. I’m not angry with you. I had a shitty day and…” He eyed his phone

but didn’t continue, shaking his head.

“Jessica?” I asked, knowing the answer before he said anything.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I can leave. I know she doesn’t like it when I’m here.”

“You’re not leaving until I know you have a plan and I know what’s been going on since you ran off. She doesn’t live here; she doesn’t get a say.”

I didn’t argue. We ate in silence. Never before had Toby offered me alcohol, so when he slid that second beer across the table toward me, I hesitated.

“You get one and only one. I can tell you’re stressed out.”

I twisted the cap off and drank.

When we’d gone through most of the extra-large pizza and drunk through most of our beers, Toby slid the box and our plates aside and folded his hands in front of him.

“It’s time, buddy. The truth. All of it. I’ve had this bad feeling since I got that call a couple of weeks back. Call it a hunch, but I knew something wasn’t right.”

I blew out a breath and met his hard cop-stare. “Okay. But, Toby?”

“Yeah.”

“I need you to be my friend right now, not this hard-ass cop. Can you do that? Can you dial it back a bit? You’re intimidating as all hell sometimes. You’re making me nervous.”

He frowned, and a flash of hurt passed through his eyes. I didn’t think he had any idea how unapproachable he could be. He didn’t mean it; it was who he was. It was why he was so good at what he did.

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I just… feel defensive when I think of anyone hurting you.”

“I know. Nobody has hurt me, okay? Remember that.”

“I’ll reserve my opinion for after.”

I sighed. It was the best response I was going to get. “So, I guess I should tell you how I found him first. My dad. That’s kinda where it all begins.”

Toby’s gaze didn’t waver as he watched and listened. I prayed he wouldn’t fly off the handle. I hoped he could understand. I needed to let it out. I hurt. Deep in my core.

“I went to a bar for dinner a few nights after I arrived in Peterborough. This low-end place in the heart of the city. Nothing special.” I paused, bit my lip and wondered how far I’d get before Toby caught on. “It was a gay bar. I’d never been in a gay bar before, and when I heard there was one in the city, I thought I’d check it out.”

I laughed a little, remembering how disappointed I’d been when I’d first walked in. I’d envisioned a nightclub in my mind: loud music, dancing, guys drunk and rubbing up against each other.

“It was a pretty unimpressive place. Moderately busy, the music a little dated, the crowd older. I found a place at the bar and ordered fries because they were the cheapest thing on the menu.” I rolled my nearly empty bottle of beer in my hands and added, “And I ordered a mug of beer.”

“I told you—”

“It was one beer. Relax. I’d spent days looking for him and was really down because I’d had no luck. It was a privilege to do something like that. It was the first time since I turned nineteen, so don’t fault me for wanting to have *one* beer and feel grown up for a change. Anyhow, after I’d been there a while, a guy came and sat on the stool beside me. Older. Mid-thirties, like you. Dark hair and a nice beard. Engaging eyes that looked at me in this way I’d never had anyone look at me. Killer thighs.”

“If this is going to turn into some sexcapade story, I don’t need to hear it. Get to the point.”

“I am. Trust me.” I peeked up and watched Toby a second before continuing. “So this guy ended up buying me another drink and we talked. He ordered food and offered to share it with me. We… flirted. I’d never… It was the first time… I thought, *fuck it*, and decided to go with it. He was hot. I was interested.”

Toby’s gaze darkened, but he didn’t speak.

“We chatted and drank through a few more drinks over the following hour or so. He bought them, so don’t freak out. I used your money wisely. Then we left together and went back to his house.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, CJ. You went home with some stranger you met in a bar? You hitchhiked? Do you have a death wish? Tell me that fucker didn’t lay a hand on you.”

“Toby, I’m nineteen. If I want to pick up guys in a bar and fuck them, I will. That’s my prerogative. Maybe I didn’t want to be a virgin forever. I’m sure you were my age or younger when you did that shit, so shut up.”

He breathed deeply through his nose a few times, biting back more comments before he waved for me to continue.

“At his house, things got… heavy. Um… We ended up in bed together. Doing stuff. Lots of stuff.”

Toby cringed, his jaw tight. “I’m struggling to see how this has anything to do with meeting your dad, and I’m not gonna lie, it’s uncomfortable to hear.”

It was funny how the truth could be right there in front of a person’s face but because it was too unfathomable to think about, they didn’t see it.

I braced myself, knowing I was in for a mountain of yelling the minute the words left my mouth.

“It has everything to do with my dad because he *was* my dad. The guy I picked up, the guy I ended up in bed with, he was Rhyker Collins and neither of us knew it until… Well, until it had gone kinda far.”

Toby froze.

He stared at me like my words didn’t compute. *Couldn’t* compute. He didn’t blink. I wasn’t sure he breathed.

Then, he exploded.

He shoved back from the island, sending his stool toppling to the ground before he nearly came across the top at me. He braced his big hands on the surface and leaned over until he was inches from my face. All intimidation. All cop. All barely suppressed rage.

“You slept with your father?” he hissed. “Tell me you didn’t just say that. Tell me I’m misunderstanding and my ears are fucking broken.”

“It was an accident. Neither of us knew. We didn’t recognize each other until… We didn’t do *everything*, just *some* stuff.”

Well, *that* time… the times afterward? We’d get to that.

“I think I’m going to be sick. How far? What stuff?”

“Toby.”

“How far,” he shouted.

“Oral.”

He wiped a hand over his face and paced the length of the kitchen.

“Everything stopped the minute we figured it out. Dad was horrified.”

“As he should be.”

“Toby, stop. You wanted the truth and you’re not letting me tell it. You’re getting pissed off, and I’m not done talking.”

He ground his teeth and glared at me from across the kitchen. “He should have fucking known.”

“How? I didn’t. I don’t exactly look anything like the nine-year-old kid he last saw. And he looked different than the fuzzy images my brain could conjure up too. We didn’t know, okay?”

Toby’s chest heaved but he took his anger down a few notches. “Then what happened?”

Suddenly, I didn’t want to tell this story anymore. As many times as I’d wanted Toby’s support and understanding, I got the feeling he wasn’t going to take well to my announcement.

“Maybe I shouldn’t tell you. Dad said—”

“No. No way. You ran off almost a month ago. This happened a few days after you arrived. Clearly, you got over that part, right? You talked. You fixed it.”

“Sort of.”

“What do you mean sort of?”

I stared at the countertop, unable to look him in the eyes any longer. “It kinda kick-started something.” I cringed. “It didn’t end after that night.”

My heart hammered so hard I felt every pulse in my ears. I resisted reaching for my rubber band, knowing Toby would see it and chalk it up to anxiety over what had happened. I wasn’t anxious, I was heartsore. Hurting. Sad that Dad had turned me out.

“CJ, look at me. Tell me I’m misunderstanding. Tell me you didn’t carry on a sexual relationship with your dad.”

It took a minute to peel my eyes from the island and look up. Toby’s gaze was wary and unreadable. His fists clenched and unclenched. His jaw ticked.

“Why is it so wrong? I don’t know why it’s such a big deal.”

He closed his eyes, taking many, many deep breaths before opening them again. “That man is lucky he isn’t standing in front of me right now, because I’d kill him. I’d fucking murder him in cold blood, do you hear me? I’m calling this in. He’s manipulated you and—”

“No. You can’t.” I was off my stool in a heartbeat, rounding the island and stilling Toby’s arm as he snagged his phone. “Toby, he was the one trying to stop it. He kept telling me it was wrong. *I* was the one who pushed for it every time. It was *me*. He didn’t manipulate me. He tried to put an end to it. That’s why I’m here. He sent me away. He said we couldn’t—”

“But he willingly fucked you!” Toby was shouting again, face red with anger. “He took you to his bed. That isn’t trying to stop it. He can say all the pretty words he wants, tell you how wrong it is and how it shouldn’t happen, but when he disregards his own preachings and takes you to his fucking bed, *that’s* manipulation, CJ.”

“It’s not. I wanted it. I still want it, but he—”

“No. Oh fuck no. No, no, no.” Toby grabbed my shoulders and shook me like he was trying to make me see sense. He was taller and loomed like an angry giant, dwarfing me in his shadow. He took a firm hold of my chin and angled it so I looked right in his eyes. “CJ, that’s incest. It’s wrong. Disgusting. It’s against the law.”

“I don’t care.”

“You’d better start caring. That man should be in jail.”

“Are you arresting him? Because if you do, you have to arrest me too. I’m a legal, consenting adult. I’m just as guilty. Is that what you’re going to do? Throw me in jail after all these years you’ve spent making sure I didn’t land there?”

“You’re a victim.”

“I’m not. I chose to do what I did, and I’d do it again if Dad would get his fucking head out of his ass and admit he wants it too.”

“I’m not listening to this. I don’t think you have a clue how many levels of wrong this is.”

“I love him.”

“Not like that, you don’t,” he snapped, his words cutting into the air with finality.

“Don’t tell me what I feel.”

“You don’t even know him.”

“He’s my dad.”

Toby paced again, his body vibrating. He pinched the bridge of his nose like he was getting a headache.

I snapped my band, unable to help it, needing grounding because my insides felt like they were going through a blender. I was skirting the edge of losing control. I felt it.

“How many times?” Toby asked after a few minutes.

“What? Why? Does it matter?”

He pinned me with that no-nonsense glare.

“Three. Two… depends what you’re asking.”

He shook his head and waved it off, disgust souring his face.

“You can believe me or not, but Dad was torn up about it. I’m the one who pushed it. That morning I called you from Winnipeg, it was because he had a freak out. The night before… It was the first time… He was drunk off his ass when it happened because he wasn’t handling things all that well. In the morning, he was guilt-ridden and hating himself. He ran off, and I was sure he was going to abandon me right there in a city I didn’t know.

“When we got back to Peterborough, things were weird. He kept his distance. But I pushed again. *Me*, Toby, *not him*. He sent me away. He said we couldn’t do it anymore. He said he wanted to be my dad but the lines were too blurred, and if I stayed, he couldn’t trust himself to keep his hands off me. He said it was for the best. I got mad. I told him he was wrong and I didn’t care what society said. He put his foot down, so I left and came here. The end. Happy? My dad fucking abandoned me like everyone else.”

My eyes burned. I snapped the band harder, relishing the sting. My chest ached, remembering the way Dad had shut it all down and refused to give in to what I knew he wanted too.

“He was right to send you away,” Toby whispered. “I’ll still fucking kill him if I ever see him, but he was right to end it. That was unhealthy and so many levels of wrong, I can’t begin to wrap my head around it. CJ, you need to forget him. I don’t think you can ever have a proper, healthy relationship with that man anymore. Let him go. He’s trying to do the right thing.”

My lip quivered, so I stuck it between my teeth and bit down. The burn in my eyes intensified. I blinked and blinked again. My chest constricted and body trembled.

“But he was everything,” I blubbered, hardly getting the words out. “He knew me like they didn’t. He understood my struggles. He listened. He cared. He—”

I was wrapped in Toby’s arms when the first tears fell. He held me tight, shushed me and didn’t let go. “It was an illusion, buddy. That isn’t love. That isn’t a relationship. Maybe he was a great dad a long time ago. Keep those memories close. Let the memories of the man from when you were nine be your hero. Not this guy. Let this guy go. You are young and there are plenty of much healthier opportunities out there for you to fall in love. Okay?”

I couldn’t answer because it wasn’t okay. Toby didn’t understand. I thought maybe I could get through to him, but I was wrong.

Dad didn’t want me around. Toby agreed with him. My mom and grandparents couldn’t care less about me. My life was upside down.

I didn’t know how to stand on my own two feet. I was alone.

Against Jessica’s wishes, Toby let me stay at his house. We made a plan. An agreement. I would finish my GED, he’d help me find work, and in the end, he’d help me get a place of my own.

I was grateful, but there was a gaping hole in my chest. An ache that wouldn’t go away. A longing I couldn’t ignore.

Dad called me only once, a few days after I got to Toby’s. I missed the call but he didn’t leave a message, so I let it go, not wanting to hear him reiterate over and over how what we’d done was wrong. Afterward, Toby encouraged me to change my number and be done with it. It hurt, but I went along with it, knowing I shouldn’t argue with him at that point.

In my head, what Dad and I had had would never be wrong. No matter what Toby said, no matter what Dad believed. What we’d had was perfect.

There would always be a place in the back of my mind that wondered…

… what if?

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty
Rhyker

IT WAS QUITE POSSIBLE I'd lost my mind.

In the weeks following Creed's departure, I sank into a pit of self-hatred. It wasn't because of what we'd done. It was because of what I'd denied and ignored and repressed. And thrown away. It was because I'd watched him leave when all I'd wanted to do was take him away and hide him from the world. Savor those precious moments of lust and longing and love all over again. Have him the way I wanted him, consequences be damned.

I hated myself for letting him go, not for taking him to my bed.

I didn't know what that said about me, but it was the truth and the more time that passed, the more time I had to realize I'd made a mistake.

I thought long and hard about the ramifications of our actions, and the truth about how he made me feel. About his age and his wants, his needs and his outspoken desires. I thought about everything.

Since the day they'd taken him away when he was nine years old, I'd been drifting, not living. Then Creed had appeared, and suddenly, there was opportunity and possibility again. A fire burned within me. He was a future I wanted to be part of. Did that future require boundaries? It should. I knew that. But… could we ignore them and do what was best for us instead? What we both so clearly wanted?

I knew there could come a time in the future when Creed might change his mind and find another man to fall in love with. And it would be healthier and safer. He was so young, it wasn't unreasonable for his heart to change paths. If that time came, be it a year or ten years away, could I understand and let him go? I'd still be his father. I'd still love him unconditionally. It might hurt, but I'd be there for him and do what was right.

He wanted this as much as I did. I saw it on his face, heard it in his pleas.

Felt it in the way we'd come together that last time.

And in the dark of night when there were only my inner thoughts and aching heart to contend with, I wanted more.

He was a craving I couldn't satiate. An addiction.

That was why, on a cold day in mid-January, I quit my job, emptied my bank account, gave my notice on my apartment, packed my truck, and left.

It wasn't a spontaneous decision. I'd thought about it endlessly, pondered pros and cons until I couldn't think straight. Peterborough was nothing more than a place to me. It wasn't home. I didn't have close friends. My parents and I barely spoke. There was nothing keeping me there. No ties. No bonds.

No love.

So I drove.

And I drove and I drove and I drove.

It was noon on a Tuesday when I drove into Saint John. Calling had done me no good. When I'd tried to contact Creed to tell him of my plans, I'd discovered his number was no longer in service.

So I was going on instinct, guessing where Creed might have run. Knowing he had one close friend he could rely on. A cop, of all people.

Because I didn't know this cop's last name or where he lived, I ended up at the local police station—probably a risky decision, considering my plans. I knew this, but I was desperate to find Creed.

If I could acquire a last name, I'd be one step closer. I wasn't above playing a bit of James Bond and waiting until I figured out who the guy was so I could follow him home.

The parking lot was half-empty when I pulled in. Cameras on lampposts silently monitored the entire area. There were squad cars in lines at one end and regular vehicles parked at the other. I used a visitor's parking space and got out, scanning the lot but not seeing an officer or anyone I could talk to.

Inside, there was a reception desk behind a plate-glass window. A female officer typed at a computer and offered me a less than friendly smile when I approached.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for one of your officers."

"Name."

"His name is Toby. We went to high school together. I was told he worked here now. Sorry, I didn't have a number and didn't know how to get

a hold of him.”

She studied my face and cocked a brow. “Officer Baranski?”

Baranski. Noted. “Yeah, that’s him.”

“He’s not in today. Your name?”

“Ryan.” Before she could ask for a last name, which I didn’t want to give, I waved her off. “It’s no big deal. I can come back tomorrow.”

“He’ll be on the street. If you want to catch him, you’ll need to come in the morning around ten. Otherwise, I make no guarantees.”

“Thanks.”

I left and pulled out my phone as I walked back to my car, Googling Toby Baranski, knowing a street cop had probably been highlighted in the local news at least once in his career. I wasn’t stupid. I knew I wouldn’t find an address, but I was hoping for a recent picture.

Bingo!

An article dated three months ago appeared. An Officer Tobias Baranski was interviewed and asked how the city was taking steps to clean up their rougher neighborhoods and how they were helping troubled teens get into proper programs. The reporter asked how the city planned on cracking down on drug deals and usage. It sounded like my guy. Especially knowing what he’d done for Creed.

There was a good picture of him too. The man had dark hair, cut military short, hard hazel eyes, and a well-built frame packed with a ridiculous amount of muscle that strained his uniform. He looked to be about the same age as me, if I had to guess.

I studied his image, noting every detail, and searing it into my brain. The following day, I’d come back to the station—a little later than morning so I’d miss his arrival—and find out when Officer Baranski was done with his shift. Then I’d be sure to be around so I could follow him home and find my goddamn son.

It was a good plan as far as plans went. Tobias Baranski pulled his squad car into the station parking lot at just after seven thirty the following night. There was a female officer with him and they chatted with their heads together as they went inside, a radio chirping on one of their hips which they ignored.

Parked on the street, I waited for his shift to officially end at eight o’clock. He exited the station at five after, phone to his ear and too engaged to notice anyone watching him. So much for cop instincts.

Good.

He got into a slate-gray Kia Sportage and pulled out onto the street. I waited until he'd gone up a half a block before I followed. We didn't go far. A couple of blocks down the main road and some weaving through about four side streets later, he pulled into a parking lot in front of a tiny red brick bungalow with young maples in the front yard, bare of leaves due to the winter weather, and a detached garage.

I parked about ten houses down and watched as Toby got out and used his key to go inside.

Then I waited.

I waited an hour, going over everything I wanted to say to Creed.

I anticipated this cop friend might give me a hard time or be skeptical about my sudden appearance, and I didn't know what all Creed might have shared, but I hoped to convince my son to leave with me.

If he's there, I reminded myself.

There was no guarantee he'd gone back to Saint John. I could be chasing ghosts for all I knew. He might be long gone. Elsewhere. Far, far away.

I hoped not.

I let out a long breath and exited the car, walking the block or so to this Toby guy's house. It was after nine when I rapped on the door, my heart skipping and palms sweating.

It didn't take long for the heavy front door to swing open. The same man I'd followed home stood beyond the threshold wearing loose-fitting joggers and a T-shirt that hugged his disgustingly hard frame. Even out of uniform, he was an impressive, intimidating beast.

He scowled and narrowed his eyes. "Can I help you?"

"I'm not sure. I'm looking for Creed. Creed… Kelly. I suspect he might be here."

The man, Toby, tipped his head to the side and analyzed me. "And you would be?"

There was a TV playing in the background, and from somewhere deeper in the house, I heard a familiar voice call out, "Toby, should I take this out of the oven? It looks done."

Toby's gaze hardened and he waited.

"I'm Rhyker Collins. Creed's father."

It was instant. The buff cop's eyes flared like an inferno, and he hauled me off my feet and slammed my back against the wall just inside the door as he spat in my face, "You son of a bitch. I swear to fucking God, you take your disgusting ass off my property before I have you thrown in jail. I ought to kick your fucking ass right here."

He vibrated with his anger, his face red and grip unyielding. I froze. There was no way in hell I could take him, and I wasn't about to try. Submitting, I held up my hands.

"Look—"

"Dad?" came a soft voice from beyond the front hallway.

"Go back in the kitchen, CJ. This doesn't concern you," Toby snarled.

"What are you doing to him? Let go, Toby!"

Creed launched himself at Toby without fear while I tried to suck air into my lungs. One of Toby's arms pressed against my throat, crushing my windpipe and restricting my airflow.

Creed tried to pry his arms off, and Toby nudged him away effortlessly.

"Toby. Stop it. Let him go," Creed shrieked. "You're hurting him."

Toby's hold loosened. Marginally. Enough I managed to suck in some air to satiate my starved lungs. But he kept me pinned to the wall, those hard-as-steel eyes rooting me to the spot, daring me to fight.

"What are you doing here?" Toby said through gritted teeth.

"I came to talk to Creed."

"Not good enough. About what? Why? Don't you think you've done enough?"

"It's none of your business, asshole."

"Wrong answer." He got in my face, so close only inches separated us. His hot breath fanned over me as he hissed, "I know all about you. Every last disgusting detail. If you think for a second I'm going to let you anywhere near this boy, you're wrong."

"Toby," Creed shouted, trying to insert himself between us. "Let go of him. This is none of your business. I'm not a kid. I don't need you to protect me, especially from my dad."

Toby shook his head and flashed his eyes toward Creed. "I'm not okay with this. And I will not let him waltz in here like what happened was nothing. It's toxic. We talked about it."

"I know." Creed placed a hand on Toby's arm. "But I told you how I felt. I told you how it went. You can't put all your anger onto one person

when we both played a role in this. You can't threaten to arrest him unless you're prepared to arrest me too." When Toby didn't respond, Creed asked, "Are you? Is that what you're going to do, Toby? Arrest me?"

"I'm trying to protect you. Keep you safe."

"Dad's not a threat."

"I beg to differ."

"That's your prerogative, I guess. Let him go so I can talk to him and find out why he's here. Please."

It took another minute before Toby's grip loosened, then he shoved me away, sending me stumbling and tripping over my feet. He stepped back but kept his body rigid and squared off with me so I knew who was in charge even as he spoke to Creed.

"Fine. You want to talk to this piece of shit, you do it somewhere else. Not in my house."

Toby turned to Creed and they shared a look I didn't understand. Creed flicked his eyes at me. "I'll be out in a second, okay? I need something warmer to wear."

Creed darted off out of sight, and Toby turned on me again, arms crossed over his chest, biceps bulging and threatening the seams of his shirt. Eyes like lasers.

"He may not think so, but he's still just a kid. Your influence over him is huge. Bigger than you might grasp. He worships the ground you walk on for some reason. Puts you on this fucking pedestal I don't understand. But know this, asshole, CJ flounders a lot. He wants desperately to be an adult but he's not there yet. He isn't quite ready to stand on his own—even though he wants to. He needs guidance and reassurance and love, not some long-lost father who's only interested in bending him over and fucking him six ways to Sunday."

"You think I don't know all that? You think I didn't see all that when he was with me? Don't throw your authority in my face and threaten me. He's my son, and I will give him everything he needs and everything he wants. And I will ensure I take care of him."

"You know what he wants, and you also know how fucking wrong that is."

"Yeah, maybe, but I'm done fighting it, and unless you're going to arrest us, then stand aside and let Creed make his own decisions."

Toby shook his head with disgust as Creed returned, zipping a hoodie, a winter hat pulled over his ears. He glanced between us and tugged my arm, guiding me out the door. Before he could shut it behind us, Toby grabbed it and prevented it from closing.

He studied Creed long and hard, pain radiating from his eyes, and although I wasn't fond of this man, I had to give him credit for giving a shit about Creed when no one else had.

"Are you coming back tonight?"

Creed flipped his gaze between Toby and me. "Yeah. I-I think so."

Toby nodded. "I'm gonna wait up. Don't make rash decisions. Think. Use your head. You're smart, CJ. Smarter than you give yourself credit for. I've always got your back even if I don't always agree with you, okay?"

"Okay."

Then he closed the door and we were alone on the front stoop.

"Why are you here?" Creed asked, his voice hesitant and barely audible.

I looked down into those radiant blue eyes. Saw the hope, the longing, the yearning. "Come on. Not here."

I took his hand, weaving our fingers together, and guided him down the street to where I'd parked. I drove us many blocks away and found a vacant lot overlooking the Bay of Fundy. There were sheaths of ice over much of the surface going out a fair distance. The night was quiet and still. Clouds covered the moon but the city lights reflected off the water's surface, glittering and dancing.

"I want you in my life," I said, breaking the silence that had slipped around us. Creed shuffled and turned in his seat to face me but remained quiet.

"I want to be your father. I want to be there for you as much or as little as you think you need me. You have a lot to learn still, and I want to be the one to teach you, guide you, show you the way.

"All those things I said before are true. I want to show you the world and never let you go. I want to watch you as you grow into the amazing man I know you are. I want to help you when you struggle and hold you together when you're down."

I paused, gathering my thoughts before turning to face him. He was guarded. Wary.

“Creed, I want to be there for you in every single way that you need me. *However* you need me. No boundaries. No omissions. No exceptions.”

“*Every* way?”

“Yes.”

“But only because *I* want it?”

I smiled and reached out, stroking knuckles down his cheek. “No. Not just for you. I have selfish reasons for it too. I’ve regretted sending you away, telling you it couldn’t happen when deep in my core, I crave it just as much.”

“I know you do. I see it.”

“You called me out, and you were right. I was fighting it. Denying it. No more.”

I hooked a hand around his waist and tugged him over the middle console. He stumbled, all arms and legs as he landed on my lap, straddling me with a small laugh. I pushed the seat back as far as it would go and stared into his shining, happy eyes.

“It’s dangerous, kiddo. I’m not gonna lie.”

“I know.”

“You told Toby.”

“I know.” His smile fell, and he cut his gaze to his lap. “He’s upset, but he won’t take action against us. I know he won’t.”

“You’re absolutely sure?”

He whipped his head up and nodded. “Yes. I know he won’t.”

“I have a plan.”

“Oh?” Creed reached up and scratched his fingers through my beard, the touch tantalizing, shooting heat through my veins. I pulled him closer, enjoying his weight against me again, his scent surrounding me. “What is it, Dad?”

“We can’t stay here. Not in this city where people know you. We can’t go back to Peterborough either. People know me there.”

“Where will we go?”

“Anywhere you want. You name it, I’ll take us there. Anywhere in the country. Coast to coast. I’ve got quite a diverse resume. I pulled all my savings, and it will get us by until I find work again. But here is the important part. Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“Your mother had your name changed when she came here, didn’t she? It’s legally CJ Kelly on your driver’s license, correct? She removed the Collins and left you with a two-letter name?”

“Yes.”

“Good. That’s good. It works in our favor. Before leaving Peterborough, I legally changed my first name to Ryan. Ryan Collins. And Ryan Collins is in no way attached to a CJ Kelly. It would take a lot of digging for someone to find the connection. It wouldn’t be impossible, the answers are there, but the person would have to be pretty determined. Are you following?”

He nodded, eyes wide, glistening with hope.

“From this day forth, you can’t call me Dad anymore. I am Ryan or Ry to you. You are not my son. You are my lover, my partner, or whatever else you want to call it, but we *aren’t* related. Wherever we go, wherever we end up, this has to remain our secret. Yours and mine. We lie through our teeth about our pasts, make up stories of who we are and how we met, and we ensure everyone believes. Secrets and lies, Creed. It’s the only way we’ll make this work. Do you understand?”

“Secrets and lies. I understand.”

“Is this what you want?”

“Yes. More than anything.”

“Are you absolutely certain?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to know, if you ever change your mind, if you ever need to let go or you find someone else you want to be with, I’ll still be here for you. I’ll *always* be here, okay? In one capacity or another. However you need me. I’m your Dad first, and that will *never, ever* change.”

“You’re my hero.”

I chuckled. “I’m just a regular guy, kiddo. Trust me. A regular guy who fucked his son and pissed off a local cop. Most would call me the villain.”

“Not me. Never.”

I smoothed my hands up his back, and his went behind my neck, clinging.

“Come here. I’ve been going through withdrawals since you walked out.”

He smiled and leaned his forehead to mine. “You want me?”

“Desperately.”

“Even though it’s wrong?”

“Despite it.”

“Dad?”

“No. Try again.”

“Ryan?”

“Yeah, kiddo.”

“I want you too.”

I closed the mere inches separating us and kissed him hard and deep. My tongue speared into his mouth and laced around his. He groaned and pressed forward, rocking his smaller body against mine and causing enough friction to fire things up.

I clung to his waist, guiding, encouraging, and savoring each sway of his hips. Loving his smaller body in my arms.

It continued for a while until I decided there wasn’t enough room in the truck to do what I wanted to do. I broke from his mouth and kneaded his perky ass through his jeans, thrusting up against him once more as I watched his pupils dilate.

“I’m going to take you back to Toby’s. You talk to him, pack your stuff, and we’ll find a hotel for the night. Tomorrow, we’ll hit the road and go anywhere we want.”

“But tonight?” A smile quirked the corner of his mouth.

I joined our mouths again. “Tonight,” I whispered against his lips, “I’m gonna fuck you until you scream yourself hoarse. I’m gonna make you come so hard, you’ll see stars. I want to lick every part of your body. Suck welts into your perfect skin. Claim you. Own you. Take you down my throat. Worship you. Savor you. Over and over and over until you can’t think. Maybe I’ll let you sleep come dawn. But it will be in my arms, naked, and wrapped all around me. How does that sound?”

“Like heaven.”

I chuckled and kissed him again. “My addiction. What have you done to me?”

It was hard to get him off my lap because I didn’t want to let him go. My cock was a stone pillar, aching to plunge into his too perfect ass. He kept his hand in mine as we drove back to Toby’s. That time, I parked in the driveway beside his Kia.

There was a light on inside even though it was late. I killed the engine and we both sat, unmoving.

“Do you want me to come in?”

Creed shook his head. “No. Toby is really protective. And he’s angry right now.”

“I saw that.”

“He’s a good guy, Da—Ry.”

“I saw that too. He could do with some better jokes.”

Creed laughed. “Yeah, I told him the same thing. He helped me when no one else cared, you know?”

“I know. For that, I will always be grateful. Can we trust him to stay quiet?”

“I think so. He may not agree, but he knows how I feel.”

“We’re gonna disappear. Get far away. He’s the only one with the power and knowledge to stop us.”

“I’ll talk to him. I may be a little while, but I’ll be back. Will you wait for me?”

“Always, kiddo.”

I leaned over and cupped his cheek, kissing him hard. When I let him go, Creed looked a little dazed.

“I could get used to this,” I told him.

“Me too.”

“I’ll be here. When you’re set, we have our whole lives ahead of us. Just you and me.”

“You and me.” He squeezed my hand.

Creed got out, and I watched him as he approached the house. The front door flew open before he made it all the way to the stoop, and Toby glared past him directly at me. As hard an edge as he was going for, there was resignation behind those eyes. He knew. He knew long before we left what Creed would choose. What Creed wanted.

I didn’t need Toby’s acceptance. I didn’t need his approval. What I needed was his silence. Creed had promised me we’d get that.

From that point on, our lives could merge. We could be and do whatever we wanted. The foundation might be built on secrets and lies, but we’d manage.

I’d be whatever Creed needed me to be. A father. A lover. A best friend. Or all of it combined. Whatever made him happy. Whatever made him complete.

OceanofPDF.com

Epilogue
Creed

THE SUN BLAZED through the window, reflecting off the mirror over the dresser and back into my eyes as I squinted and tried for the third time to tie my necktie. My fingers shook and I failed again, growling my frustration and tearing it loose.

“Need a hand?”

“These things are impossible. Why do I have to dress up? Why a suit?”

“Because it’s an important ceremony, and you should look your best.”

I turned, gaze trailing up and down my dad’s—*Ryan’s*—chosen outfit. A matching suit and tie like the one I wore, fitted and hugging his body in all the right places. He looked good. Better than good. It was sexy and gave me the urge to strip him out of it and say fuck today.

When he smiled at the attention, creases formed in the corners of his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that or we’ll be late.”

“So? Let’s be late.”

“Nuh-uh.”

He grabbed the loose ends of my tie and tugged me closer. With more skill than I was convinced I would ever possess, he tied it perfectly, fitting the knot snug against my neck. When he was satisfied, he took my face between his hands and drew me in for a knee-weakening kiss that sent shivers over my skin and pulsed in places below my belt.

“You look incredible,” he said against my mouth. “Good enough to eat.”

I chuckled and hitched my hips forward, rutting against his leg. “Not so bad yourself, old man.”

“Careful, or I’ll show you just how not old this man is.” One more solid grind and he pushed me back with a warning glare. “You’re asking for it.”

“Maybe.”

“Behave.”

I rolled my eyes and pecked his lips one last time before turning back to the mirror and examining the knot he’d made. “Do you think he’ll

come?”

Dad’s brow furrowed a minute while he thought, then he sighed. “I don’t know. I hope so. For you.”

“I thought he’d be happier. He still doesn’t get it. He still sounds off when we talk.”

“That’s his battle. You can’t let him bring you down. But he *is* proud of you. I know he is, even if he can’t find the words to say it.”

“He has a new girlfriend.”

“Does he?”

“Yeah. She sounds nicer than Jessica. She’s a pediatrician. Wants to get married and have kids.”

Dad chuckled. “Let me guess, Toby’s quaking in his boots.”

“A little. I told him to get over it. He’s been engaged once, I don’t see the big deal. I told him he’d be a good husband and father. He was always patient with me. Treated me good.”

Dad sensed my plummeting mood and took me into his arms, hugging me to his chest. “I love you, kiddo. This is a big day for you. Smile. No more negative thoughts, okay? We should get going or we’ll be late.”

Four years ago, when we left Saint John, we’d driven west. All the way to the coast and British Columbia. It was a beautiful, long trip where Dad and I had taken the time to settle into our new, controversial relationship with no limits and no boundaries.

We’d found a small apartment, Dad got a security job working for a big corporate firm, and I worked on my schooling. After hiring a tutor, I finished my GED and applied to the local college. I started taking classes to get my mechanics certification along with my welding tickets.

With medication and program modifications, I succeeded. It took longer than the average person, but I didn’t care. Dad supported me through it all.

Today was my graduation.

I had a job lined up, and the full support of my father/lover/partner. A secret I would take to the grave. What we had was unique and frowned upon, but it was ours. No one knew the truth. Like Dad had said four years ago, everything we had needed to be built on secrets and lies.

And we’d gone far. And we were happy.

The auditorium was bursting with families and friends of all the college students receiving diplomas and certificates today. Hundreds and hundreds

of people present to cheer on and congratulate our success.

As I crossed the stage and shook hands with the dean of my program, I smiled and searched the crowd for my dad.

He stood six rows back, cheering louder than anyone else in the crowd, pride blooming across his face. I winked at him and waved my diploma in the air. Just as I went to exit the stage, another familiar face caught my eye.

A man I hadn't seen in four years. A man who'd kept in touch reluctantly and warily. The man who'd saved me from a potential life in jail when I was a teen.

He was on his feet glaring with those cop-hardened eyes, a hint of a smile turning the corner of his lips as he clapped.

My feet stalled as our eyes locked.

He'd come. Despite all the times he'd adamantly voiced his opinion on my life choices, he'd come.

I waved, and his smile broke free. He gave me a thumbs up and shooed me off the stage since I was clogging up the procession.

When the event was finished, Dad met me in the lobby, engulfing me in a smothering hug. "I'm so fucking proud of you." When he pulled back, he took my face in his hands and kissed me soundly, fingers threading through my hair.

No shame. No regret. No denial.

I took it all, savored our connection, and sighed against his mouth.

We came apart to someone clearing their throat nearby.

Toby.

Dad's fingers laced with mine, and he tugged me against his side as he and Toby exchanged a look that spoke volumes without saying a thing. Challenging each other.

"You came," I said, dispelling the electric charge in the air.

Toby broke free from his stare down and smiled as he met my eyes. "I wouldn't miss you graduating college for anything. I knew you could do it. I knew you had it in you."

He held out his hand to shake, but I shoved it away and crashed against his chest, hugging him. "I've missed you."

He squeezed me tight. "I've missed you too. I'm so proud of you. You've become an amazing young man."

"I wouldn't have made it this far without your help."

"I don't believe that."

We released our hold just as a pretty woman with a golden-blonde braid over her right shoulder nudged Toby's arm and handed him a bottle of water. "It was this or shitty coffee. Is this okay?"

"Perfect."

Toby took the bottle of water and shifted his gaze between Dad and me as he wrapped an arm around the woman's waist. "Talia, I'd like you to meet some friends of mine. This is CJ and his… partner, Ryan."

My heart swelled. It was a small thing, but for Toby, it was huge. As many times as he'd cringed and preached and voiced his opinions, it was acceptance in the smallest form. Something I didn't think I'd ever get from him.

"Nice to meet you." Dad thrust out his hand, and Talia shook it before taking mine.

"Congratulations."

"Thank you."

We stood for a few minutes in awkward silence. I didn't know what to say or do and reached for the rubber band on my arm when the tension grew too dense.

Toby stopped me with a soft touch, sensing my mounting discomfort. "What do you get if you cross a student and an alien?"

"Oh, Jesus, here we go." Dad crushed my ear to his chest, covering the other as I laughed and squirmed. "Four years trying to banish the shitty joke telling. I'll save you from this horror, CJ. I guarantee it's terrible and you don't want to hear it."

"He spent our entire flight practicing them on me," Talia said, smirking at Toby.

"Come on, this is the best one there is. CJ, you know you love them."

I pushed free from Dad's hold and let him wrap his arms around me instead, my back to his front as he rested his chin on my shoulder and nuzzled my neck, planting kisses shamelessly. I sighed in his hold.

"Ask me again," I said.

"What do you get if you cross a student and an alien?"

I thought for a minute but shook my head.

"Something from another universe-ity."

Dad groaned and buried his face in my neck. "Not good. So not good."

"What's the king of all school supplies?"

I shook my head, a grin plastered to my face. "I don't know."

“The ruler. Why was school easier for cave people?”

“There was no history to study,” I blurted.

“You’re as bad as he is,” Dad whispered in my ear. “We have dinner reservations, remember?”

I tipped my head to see Dad better. “Can we invite them?”

Dad eyed Toby and Talia. I knew there was an exchange that took place between him and Toby that I didn’t see, but whatever nonverbal decision they came to, it must have been a truce.

“Sure.”

As we wandered to the parking lot, Talia walked ahead and chatted with Dad while I had a moment with Toby.

“You doing okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’m happy. Things are good with us.”

He pursed his lips but nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

Before we reached the car, Toby tugged me to a stop. I searched his face while he peered across the dark parking lot, looking uncertain. Then he nodded, as though coming to some decision. When he turned back to me, he pulled an envelope from an inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to me.

“For you.”

I stared at the envelope then looked up. “What is it?”

“Open it.”

I unglued the edge and tugged the paper from within. Unfolding it, I stared at what appeared to be a long form birth certificate. Frowning, confused, I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

“Look closer.”

I read each line. It was *my* birth certificate. Creed Jackson Kelly. It was the same form I had at home. The one I’d stolen from Grandpa’s desk the day I ran away. Except, it was different. Where was the hyphen? Where was the Collins?

Also, the section where it was supposed to list my parents was different. Under Mother’s Full Name, it said Madison Rebecca Kelly. But under the Father’s Full Name, it said Unknown.

My eyes widened, and I flicked my gaze to Toby.

“Unknown?”

“I had all traces of your father stricken from the records. According to Vital Statistics Canada, your father’s name was never recorded.”

“But… How?”

Toby shrugged and firmed his lips. “I know people. I have my ways.”

“But isn’t that—”

“Don’t ask questions.”

My jaw dropped, and I barely contained a laugh. “Holy shit, you’re a dirty cop.”

Toby glared but then burst out laughing as he pulled me into a headlock. “And you’re a fucking little shit. You say that again, I’ll kick your ass.”

We laughed and shoved one another for a minute before straightening. “Seriously, is this a fake?”

“No. And yes, I did shit I shouldn’t to make it happen. And yes, I could get in a world of trouble if anyone found out. But they won’t.” It was a warning, and I nodded. “This wipes him from your record, CJ. There is no longer any existing evidence out there that he is your father. None. Any searches will come up dry.”

I stared at the altered form in my hand. “Why did you do it?”

“Are you happy?”

“Yes. Best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“That’s why. My opinions don’t matter. You can take this anywhere now. Legally, you can belong to each other, if that’s something you guys decide down the road. You get me?”

Holy shit. Toby just gave us an opening I’d never dreamed was possible. Without a legal connection, without there being a trail to tie us together, we could marry someday.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything. I’m just glad you found some peace. You deserve it.”

He smothered me in another hug, and I was hard-pressed to let go. Dad and Talia looked on, but they gave us our moment.

Before Toby released me, he whispered. “Hey, CJ?”

“Yeah?”

“Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Olive.”

I smirked. “Olive who?”

“Olive you.”

“Olive you too. I don’t regret a thing, Toby.”
“Good. I’m happy for you.”

THE END

OceanofPDF.com

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading. Reviews are always appreciated so please consider leaving a few words on Amazon, Goodreads, or Bookbub. Every little bit counts.

Be sure to **follow me on Amazon** or **Bookbub** so you don't miss out on new releases.

Please consider **signing up for my newsletter** and be the first to hear about upcoming releases, view exclusive teasers and secret snippets, and hear about events where I'll be signing.

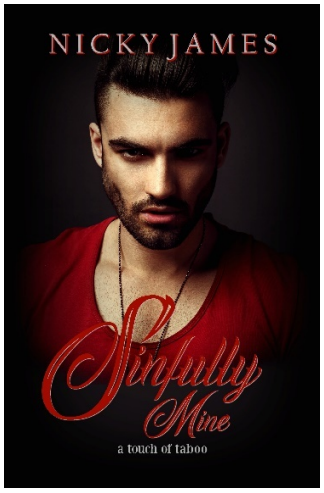
Lastly, come join in the fun in my reader group on Facebook. Daily interactions and all kinds of giveaways happening at random. Join today: **Nicky's Tortured Souls**

Connect with Nicky on Social Media

OceanofPDF.com

More taboo for you…

Sinfully Mine



Four years ago, mistakes were made, lines were crossed, rules were broken.
It was wrong, and it never should have happened.
But, the past refuses to stay buried, wrongs start feeling right, and lines begin to blur.
Sometimes, the heart wants what the heart wants, and nothing will stand in its way.
Consequences be damned. Rules be damned.
Sometimes, secrets are sinfully delicious.

OceanofPDF.com

Other Titles by Nicky James

Standalone Contemporary

Trusting Tanner
Twinkle Star
Love Me Whole (available in audio)
Rocky Mountain Refuge
The Christmas I Know
Long Way Home

Trials of Fear

Owl's Slumber (available in audio)
Shades of Darkness
Touch of Love
Fearless (A companion novel)
Lost in a Moment
Cravings of the Heart
Heal With You

Fear Niblets

Rigger's Decision

Healing Hearts Series

No Regrets (available in audio)
New Beginnings: Abel's Journey (available in audio)
The Escape: Soren's Saga
Lost Soul: AJ's Burden

Taboo

Sinfully Mine
Secrets & Lies

Historical

Until the End of Time
Steel My Heart

Tales from Edovia Series

Something from Nothing
Buried Truths
Secrets Best Untold

OceanofPDF.com